The
CAMBRIC MASK

By

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

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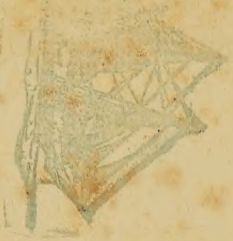

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THE CAMBRIC MASK

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A Romance

By

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

Author of

"The King in Yellow," "Ashes of Empire," "The Red Republic," "Lorraine," "The Haunts of Men," etc., etc.

New York

Frederick A. Stokes Company

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To

E. C.

Red-Bird, be my messenger!
With my love I send to her
This small book I penned to her
From my shallow store of lore:
Scarlet-robed ambassador,
Why should we pretend to her
That we speak in metaphor?

Northward, Red Ambassador,
Flutter lightly to her door!—
For your train a dainty corps
Of attachés raise for her,—
Golden-Finch and Tanager
Skilled in eloquence to pour
Diplomatic praise for her.

Take the King-Bird on your way,—
Halcyon, and Crested-Jay,
Purple Finch, and Recollet,
As Interpreters for me;—
Take the rose and grey Towhee,
Take the Gipsy Silk-Tail gay,
Draped in silken organdie.

To your Southern Embassy
Versed in verse and virolays
Secretaries are attached,
To instruct the lately hatched
In Romance and Roundelays
Madrigals and Sonnets matched.

Veery, Bobolink, and Lark,
Nightingales for after dark,
Cackling Grackles from the Park,
Yellow-eyed and hackle-dyed,
Crackling, satin sleek, outside—
Satan inside,—save the mark ! —
Gowned Attorneys in their pride.

Let the fierce Shrike follow her,
Fight and die for love of her,—
Let each feathered forester
Sound the call : To wing ! To wing !
So shall you my greeting bring
Red Ambassador to her !
So shall you my greeting sing
From your shallow store of lore,
Scarlet feathered Troubadour—
Sing my greeting till the Spring
Wakes below the snow once more.

R. W. C.

Mid-Winter, 1899.

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THE CAMBRIC MASK

CHAPTER I

A NEWSPAPER PARAGRAPH

INTRODUCING TWO BENEVOLENT GENTLEMEN WHOSE CURIOSITY IS AROUSED BY A NEWSPAPER CLIPPING

WHEN the president of the Sweet-Fern Distilling Company climbed down from the Pullman car, he lingered, as he always did, rubbing his double chin with a fat thumb, apoplectic eyes following the receding squall of dust where the last car of the Mohawk Express clattered around the curve into the smoke-choked tunnel.

The vice-president, who stood on the sun-scorched platform beside his president, dust-

ing cinders from a ready-made suit of broadcloth, offered his invariable observation:

"If them cusses had went and built the U. & C. railroad thirty mile north—eh, Guernsey?"

And the president replied as he had replied to the same remark for twenty years:

"Or if the sweet-fern grew along their darned line—eh, Creed?"

To which suggestion Joshua Creed sniffed as usual, and picking up his lank valise, walked softly into the Water Tower shanty.

Daniel Guernsey followed, wheezing a protest at self-propulsion; for the president of the Sweet-Fern Distilling Company was a gentleman of full habit and sedentary inclinations, and auto-locomotion was distasteful to him.

"Hey, Murphy!" he said to the solitary old track-walker whose duties included watching the water-tower;—"say, Murphy, jest you take this bag into your shanty will you?"

The grey-haired track-walker picked up the valise indifferently. He had done the same thing at intervals for twenty years.

"Much obliged," said Guernsey following the old man into the watchman's shanty; "jest sit it down anywhere, Murphy; never mind where;—I ain't particular;—no sir."

The president's tone was hearty, almost jocular, but he did not look at Murphy when he spoke; he was afraid the old man might ask him for a tip,—but he had been afraid of this for twenty years.

"Now I'll jest set down here; don't let me disturb you, Murphy;—I'll jest set here."

He paused in displeasure, for Joshua Creed, the lean vice-president, had absently seated himself in the only chair, apparently oblivious of his ranking officer's intentions. Guernsey stared at Creed, then sulkily squatted on his own valise, irritably conscious that Creed was comfortable.

"Got a newspaper, Murphy?" asked

Creed, pretending not to notice Guernsey's discomfort, and stroking his shaven upper lip with bony fingers.

But Guernsey had already forestalled him, and now sat hunched up on his valise, fat legs wide apart, heavy head buried in the single sheet of the *Mohawk County Star*.

Murphy raised his apathetic eyes to the window and gazed blankly at the long line of rails glittering in the white afternoon glare. Creed transferred his attention from the purple neck and ears of his president, to the withered countenance of Murphy.

"Hain't that buckboard hitched up, yet?" he asked with a hard relaxation of his hard jaw. The unlovely facial contortion opened the dry crack between nose and chin which served for a mouth.

Guernsey lifted one eyebrow, looking across the top of his newspaper toward the shanty door.

"He's hitchin' up," wheezed the pres-

ident: "Murphy, jest step out and tell my man to hurry, will you. An' tell him to give you a cigar, Murphy, if he's got one."

At this unexampled munificence Creed shut his thin mouth firmly and leaned back in the chair; as for Murphy, he limped away, too astonished to reply.

"Your a-spilin' of that there old man," said Creed coldly.

"I don't buy my coachman's cigars," replied Guernsey; "if Dodson can do Murphy a little kindness for me, it ain't a-goin' to cost me nothin'; an' nobody's the worse I guess."

After a moment he added: "Air you tired a settin' in that chair, Joshua?"

"No, I hain't," said Creed, without emotion.

"Selfish annermal," muttered Guernsey under his breath, and thrust his nose closer to the newspaper, sulkily aware that Creed was attempting to read the back columns of advertisements.

Presently Creed asked for half the paper, and Guernsey reluctantly tore the sheet down the middle crease and handed over the half that contained the lesser items and advertisements. And that manœuvre was the greatest mistake of his life; he had not the faintest suspicion of it for the moment; he might never have been aware of it had he not noticed Joshua Creed's long bony fingers tighten on the edge of the sheet until the flimsy wood-pulp paper split with a faint crackling that startled Guernsey and aroused Creed's caution, too late.

"He's found something in that paper," thought Guernsey pretending to be absorbed in his own half of the journal. He dared not look up again, but, listening, he heard Creed stealthily tearing a corner out of the paper.

"What air you a doin,' Joshua?" he demanded suddenly.

Creed's parchment skin flushed.

"Hey?" he asked blankly.

"Was you asleep?" inquired Guernsey; "Quit tearin' that there paper."

"It ain't yourn, is it?" retorted Creed, —"if it is, here's a cent;" he shoved one large dry hand into his trowsers, hesitated, then cautiously withdrew it, adding—"I'll settle damages with Murphy, Dan'l Guernsey."

"What was you a-tearin' out?" insisted Guernsey.

"Time-table for the U. & C.," replied Creed, and got up, tossing the mutilated paper onto the chair behind him.

Guernsey possessed himself of the chair as Creed went out of the door. He pretended to read, but, behind the newspaper, he saw Creed, through the window, throw a bit of crumpled paper into the tall grass beside the water-tower. A moment later Creed disappeared toward the shed where Dodson was harnessing a pair of bays to the double buckboard.

"I guess I'll see what was so darned secret

about that time-table," muttered Guernsey, waddling out to the water-tower. It hurt him to bend his waistband, but he leaned over and groped about until his glasses slid off his nose and disappeared in the long grass. He clutched at them; they were gone, and he was blinder than a bat without them. He clutched again and there was one chance in a million that he would find them. He lost the chance, but the luck of the Guernseys held better than that, for in his fat fist, crushed into a ball, he discovered the pellet of newspaper that Joshua Creed had torn from the journal and thrown away.

At the same moment the grating of wheels warned him, and he thrust the wad of paper into his waistcoat pocket just as the buckboard appeared around the shanty corner. In the buckboard sat Creed, and his grim face changed when he beheld Guernsey, knee-deep in the grass beside the water-tower. For Creed instantly grasped the

situation, and his lean visage contracted until the skin on the cheek bones glistened.

Guernsey knew that Creed knew, but he had the whip hand and he knew that too.

"What was it you was a-hidin' out here in the grass, Joshua Creed?" he asked. "No, don't you go denyin' it; I seen you, an' if I hadn't lost my glasses ——"

He waddled out to the cinder road and laid one hand on the horses' bits.

"Git out an' find my glasses, Dodson," he said; and, as the coachman sprang into the tall grass, the president turned reproachfully to Creed:

"You was concealin' the market reports from me; yes, you was, Joshua Creed, to take advantage of your own friend and partner."

"Hey!" said Creed, suspiciously.

"Ya-as you did," snarled Guernsey, turning to receive the glasses recovered by Dodson. He wiped them, tried them on his flat nose, and removed them to breathe upon each

lens separately and polish it with a red silk handkerchief.

"I've a mind to go and hunt for that paper," he said, peering askance at Creed with near-sighted eyes.

"It wa'n't nothin'," replied Creed sullenly, yet more at ease now that he was sure Guernsey had not found the scrap of paper.

"Old fox," he reflected, "a-nosin' into that there swale grass! I guess you ain't no wiser for all your cussed smartness, Dan'l Guernsey!"

Guernsey climbed into the buckboard, wheezed once or twice, then lighted a very long and very black cigar.

"Good-by, Murphy," he said affably; "drive on, Dodson."

But before the buckboard started a thought struck Creed, and he leaned out of the vehicle tossing a ten-cent piece to Murphy.

"Take it," he said grimly, "I tore the time-table out of your paper."

The old man took the coin in a dazed manner, limping into the road to pick it up. He stood there, until the buckboard whirled out of sight.

"Old fox," mused Guernsey; "he did that to make me think it was the time-table. He's jest wasted ten cents though."

A few moments later, Dodson the coachman, turned in his seat and said:

"Beg pardon, Mr. Guernsey, sir,—if you wish the time-table——"

"Hey?" said Guernsey.

"Were you wishing to see the *Mohawk County Star*, sir?"

"Yes, have you got one?" blurted out Guernsey.

Creed made an instinctive motion, then checked it, but for a moment he appeared to be on the point of taking Dodson by the neck.

"Gimme the paper, Dodson," said Guernsey with a sidelong leer at Creed. Dodson reached under the seat and drew out a soiled

copy of the *Star*. Guernsey took possession of it with malignant alacrity. He leaned back in his seat, opening the paper, pretending not to look into the lower right-hand corner where the vital interest lay—vital to him indeed.

"Where did you say that time-table might be?" he asked sarcastically, looking up at Creed; then, startled at the sneer on Creed's dry mask of a face, he hastily searched the lower right-hand corner of the paper.

Somebody had cut out the very paragraph that Creed had mutilated in Murphy's copy.

For a moment Guernsey was speechless with wrath, then recollecting the wad of paper in his pocket, he substituted feigned anger for the real, partly for effect, partly to cover his increasing curiosity concerning a paragraph missing in two copies of the same paper.

Creed, too, at first surprised and gratified to find the paragraph so unexpectedly missing, began to reflect that if it had been cut

out, the person who had taken the trouble to cut it out might probably prove vastly troublesome to him.

"Who's been a-cuttin' of this here paper?" wheezed Guernsey. Creed listened attentively as Dodson, much crestfallen, said: "No one as I know, sir, leastwise I didn't, sir. Murden had it."

"Where did you git it?" repeated Guernsey in short puffs. It distressed him to exert himself even in pretending to be angry.

"Mike Murden he had it,—he takes it at the store, sir—it was in the wrapper when I see Mike open it."

Guernsey, secure in the knowledge that he had the missing paragraph, allowed his anger to simmer away in grunts and snorts; but Joshua Creed bit his thin lips and pondered in silence while the buckboard rolled on toward the Sweet-Fern Distilling Company's plant, thirty miles away—thirty long dusty miles from the nearest railroad—the Sunset division of the Ulster & Chenango

Railway which swung into the tunnel below the water-tower at Murphy's shanty.

"So it was the time-table, eh?" observed Guernsey solely to irritate Creed. He might better have kept his mouth closed.

"Yes, sir,—that's where the time-table is, in the *Star*, sir," replied Dodson.

"Eh? Well—I guess that's true," said Guernsey, blankly. He had suddenly recollected that the time-table of the U. & C. was always in that identical spot in the *Star*, and he looked uncomfortably at Creed. Had he been making a fool of himself after all? Still, why should Creed take such pains to dispose of a time-table?

"I've got it in my vest-pocket anyway," he reflected, "and I'll jest see what there is in that time-table besides misinformation for the public."

"Have a cigar, Joshua?" he inquired affably, hoping against hope that Creed might refuse.

And again the luck of the Guernseys'

stood by him, for Creed mistook the offer for a request, and hastily placed a cigar in his mouth with the acid information that it was his last.

"Selfish annermal," thought Guernsey, "like a swimmin' pig he cuts his own throat."

"Comin' events cast their shadows afore," he said aloud, willing to make Creed uneasy.

"Depends on the sun, which way the shadow's cast," replied Creed.

"Air you acquainted with the workin' of the sun, Joshua Creed?" inquired Guernsey, suavely.

"There was," said Creed, grimly, "a individool called Joshua who monkeyed some with that there planet."

Guernsey relapsed into inertia; presently he snored, head wagging fatly with the swaying buckboard.

Joshua Creed's eyes also were closed, but he was thinking of Murden and wondering

why he had not only cut the time-table from the *Mohawk County Star*, but had also included in his clipping an obscure paragraph of three lines relating to a contemplated improvement on the Ulster & Chenango Railway.

"Perhaps," mused Creed, "he done it by accident. If he didn't I'll run him out of Mohawk County purty blame quick!"

It was dusk as the buckboard passed the Spook Bridge below Sark's. Guernsey still slept, moaning and grunting in his slumber; Creed was awake, thin lips still gripping an unsmoked cigar.

He looked earnestly up at the lights in Sark's windows, then his eyes wandered to the dusky moorland beyond where, in the night, acres of sweet-fern perfumed the June air—acres and acres of it—at $5 a ton, raw, —thirty long dusty miles from the nearest railroad.

Guernsey's troubled sleep gave him bad dreams; he murmured thickly: "Two dol-

lars profit per ton—an' thirty miles from the railway."

Creed's acrid sneer gave place to a leer.

"Double it for clear profit on every ton—if the railroad was built to Amber Lake—you fat-headed, stall-fed Holstein!"

"Hey!" wheezed Guernsey, waking—"eh?—oh, we're at the Spook Bridge! My stomach hurts."

"Go to sleep," muttered Creed, "you've a mile and a half yet;" and Guernsey groaned and gurgled and presently snored heavily.

"Who is this man, John Sark, Dodson?" asked Creed, as they swung into the lake road below Sark's house.

"Mr. Sark, sir? Oh, he keeps hot-houses for to breed silk-worms, sir, and they do say he raises butterflies, too, though I don't rightly know what for, sir."

"He's a naturalist," said Creed; "he makes reports to Washington. That isn't

what I mean; I want to know what he is—where he comes from?"

"He comes from abroad, sir—London, they say, though he's a American, too, for that matter, being as he was in the army."

"Rich?"

"They say so, sir."

"And he bought that house from Harvey Ember?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the land?"

"Yes, sir—for a song."

"All Ember's tract? Sweet-fern an' all?"

"Yes, sir. But he won't cut it. Murden he says that Mr. Sark is rich enough without peddlin' sweet-fern."

Creed noted the impudence but let it go unrebuked. Anyway Dodson was Guernsey's coachman and he couldn't reach him. Besides, sweet-fern essence at two dollars profit a ton had given him his hundred thousands; he could afford to listen to

coachmen's impudence. What he wanted was the five dollars per ton that was wasted in chemicals, wages, and thirty dusty miles of transportation to the railway through Sark's land and over Sark's private road.

He could not get all of it; chemicals and wages must be paid for—but both were cheap; it was the transportation that cost.

"Now if that there railroad, sir——" began Dodson.

"Shut up, you whelp!" snapped Creed so suddenly that Dodson nearly fell off his seat, and Guernsey awoke with an apoplectic cough.

"We're at your place," said Creed briefly; "git out, Dan'l."

"Hey? How? Well—er—are you goin' to stay all night with us?" inquired Guernsey ungraciously. "I'll have Dodson drive you over to your place if you can't stay."

"I'll walk," replied Creed, getting out stiffly, valise in hand; "here's your niece; good night."

"What is there for dinner?" was Guernsey's greeting as his niece appeared by the great gate. "Here, kiss me if you want to; now run in an' tell aunty I'm a-comin' an' hungry, too—run away, 'Lida—Dodson, my bag!—where's Creed?"

"Mr. Creed has went home, sir," said Dodson, haughtily; "which he called me a whelp, sir."

"Hey?—Well, I guess you are. Git that bag into the house p. d. q. Didn't you hear me say I want to eat?—hey! 'Lida, jest you tell 'em I'm comin' an' hungry, too."

He waddled into the house; Dodson slammed the drive gate and followed with the rugs and valise, unconscious that Creed, outside the rose-hedged fence, was watching the scene.

"Corn-fed hog," muttered Creed, picking up his own valise; "I guess I'll go into the president business myself before long; I guess I'll have time to feed a little, too, then."

And, instead of taking the road back to his own homestead, where his son and his dinner awaited him, he turned into the foot-path that led past the Distillery down the hollow to Murden's store.

To his surprise the store was dark, doors and shutters closed. He looked around at the huts where the Distillery employees lived; there were no lights. He went to Dagberg's, to Mitchel's; all was dark and silent, and it was not yet eight o'clock. Once he called: "Murden!" There was no response. He stood a moment, thoughtful, a trifle worried, looking out over the dusky Barrens. Somewhere out there Ember's shanty lay; but it was too far, and a man might lose his way in the Barrens, even by day.

"Murden! Dagberg!" he called once more.

"They've gone to the lake to set lines," he mused, and turned away toward the high-road.

And, as he walked, once or twice he imagined he heard the distant gallop of hoofs, far out on the Barrens.

"I guess not," he muttered, "nobody hunts 'coons in June."

He lingered a moment, undecided, then turned back and stretched his lean powerful legs over the dark road he knew so well; and, as he walked, he thought of those three lines he had torn from the *Mohawk County Star*, in order that his old friend and partner, Daniel Guernsey, might not read them.

But, at that very moment, Daniel Guernsey was searching his waistcoat pocket for a crumpled bit of newspaper containing those very same lines. He found the soiled scrap of paper, and putting on his glasses, he carefully smoothed out the clipping on the table under the lamp and read slowly, tracing each word with a fat forefinger:

"*The Sunset Div. of the U. & C. have decided to extend their railroad to Market-*

ville with stations at Amber Lake, Weazeltown, and Heavy Falls. Contracts for the work have been let."

"Thunder an' lightnin'!" bawled Guernsey waddling wildly to the door; "John Sark's land is worth a million, an' he don't know it, an' Joshua Creed does!"

CHAPTER II

TROUBLE BEGINS

DESCRIBING TWO DISPUTES WHICH ENDED MOST MELODIOUSLY

THAT same night, Harvey Ember, standing in the doorway of his unpainted house far out on the Barrens, heard the dull tattoo of horses' hoofs across the star-lit waste.

Few people rode the Barrens, even by day; nobody rode, night or day, beyond the frontier of that boundless desolation. His house marked the frontier; there were no clearings beyond, nothing of civilisation.

Ember listened, then raised his head. Dissipation had marred it, but it was still a distinguished profile that he turned to the wind as the thudding of hoofs sounded

nearer and nearer. Suddenly two horsemen took shape in the darkness close before him; they were upon him before he could move, throwing their horses back on their haunches and springing to the porch beside him.

"Ember!" called one of the horsemen; "don't look like that, man! It's me, Mike Murden!—and that's Dagberg! What's the matter with you?" he continued, shaking Ember's arm; "I guess you ain't scared of us, are you?"

"No," said Ember sullenly; "let go my arm, Murden."

He disengaged himself, and shot a sharp glance at Dagberg.

"I don't want to talk to you," he said ungraciously; "anyway Rose is in there."

"I guess you've got more than one room to your shanty, haven't you?" asked Murden, calmly. "Send your daughter into the kitchen; I've got to talk to you—and I will."

His strong, heavy face was not exactly

menacing—it seldom was—with Ember. But Ember had never yet withstood his will, and he did not withstand it now.

"Come on!" repeated Murden, breathing heavily.

Then the weak streak in Ember showed, for he began to swear at Murden, saying he never would listen to any more schemes; cursing Dagberg, too, for a bigger fool than the usual run of Germans; but all the while he was walking slowly into the house, both men behind him knowing perfectly well that it would end by their having their way with him.

"Oh, shut up," said Murden with good-natured contempt; "don't act like an ass, Harve."

"I'll act as I please!" said Ember, turning on him fiercely.

"Well, well," said Murden, "let it go at that, Harve." And Ember, muttering rebellion, led the way to a room that served as dining-room and parlour.

It was a pretty room, bright as a flower with chintz and rugs and a few bits of silver and mahogany strangely out of place in an unpainted two-storied shanty on the edge of the Barrens. They had belonged to Ember when he lived in the house now occupied by John Sark.

"Where is Miss Ember?" asked Murden in a respectful voice.

"I don't know unless she's in the kitchen washing up the dishes." This was not true; Harvey Ember's daughter had not yet come back from Sark's, but Ember shrank from saying so for several reasons.

"What the devil do you want anyway?" he said, turning on Dagberg with a scowl.

The German, a sour, stunted fellow with great hairy hands and bandy legs, looked sullenly across at Murden. The latter opened his heavy jaws as if about to speak, but Ember cut him short.

"I won't go into this thing; the man has treated me badly but I won't risk jail to pay

him off. Now," he added, with weak triumph on his face, "what have you got to say, Mike Murden?"

"I've got to say this," said Murden; "there's a million of good dollars growing wild on them hills of John Sark's—hills that was yours once, Harve Ember—hills that you sold for half the value of the taxes."

"Don't I know it?" said Ember irritably. "Let me alone, Murden."

"You made a fool mit yourself; vat you tink, eh?" demanded Dagberg.

"He paid all I asked him," said Ember in a sudden spasm of justness—adding however: "Sark is no friend of mine and I don't care what happens to him."

"Come, come, Harve," said Murden with heavy familiarity; "there's a million in sweet-fern on them hills the day the U. & C. build their road to Amber Lake. Are you going to let it rot there? You've scarcely the price of a drink in your pants. Are you

goin' to let John Sark wake up to find he's doubled his million at your expense?"

"He won't sell, I tell you," said Ember doggedly.

"He'll sell if he gets his price," said Murden; "he don't know the railroad means to build and he won't know it, for I wiped out them three lines before I forwarded him his newspaper. That land ain't worth nothin' to him—now; it wa'n't worth nothin' to him when he bought it; he bought it out of charity——"

"You lie!" said Ember flushing darkly; "he bought it because I wouldn't sell my house without the land. He wanted the house and he had to take the land."

"Well, well," said Murden, with his easy, unruffled humour, "the p'int is this, Harve; we want that land, and we are goin' to git it!"

Murden's dialect always increased with his apparent good English; but, when furious, which was an indulgence he rarely

granted himself, his speech was curiously tinged with an Irish brogue.

"Harve," said Murden suddenly, "you've got to buy that land. He promised to sell it to you, if you ever wanted it back."

Ember glanced nervously at Dagberg, then dropped his head and began drumming on the table with cigarette-stained fingers. There was a bottle on the table; Murden went to the sideboard and brought back three tumblers.

"I have no money," said Ember, accepting a glass of whisky and water from Murden. He drank the contents of the glass, suffering Murden to refill it.

"Dagberg, Con Nolan, Spike Mitchel and me,—we have made up a purse," said Murden dropping his voice. "When you get the land, you go hunks on a million with us five gents. Ain't that right, Fritz?"

"Sure," replied Dagberg, wiping his stubby beard on the back of his great hairy fist.

"Well—what do you want me to do?" snarled Ember, already beaten, knowing that Murden despised his weakness, but totally incapable of withstanding the heavy will of the men.

"I want you to go to Sark and tell him you want to buy back your land. Give him some game about lovin' the flowers an' trees of the old homestead. See? We've got the money; your business is to get the land,—and get it quick!"

"You don't want me to go to-night, do you?" snapped Ember.

"Well, I guess yes, sez John!" replied Murden, laughing. "Do you think I'm going to leave a million out over night? What's to prevent that old screw Guernsey from readin' the paper at the Water Tower to-night? I rubbed out the item in his paper and in Creed's and in all I could get. But they send the *Star* to Murphy's shanty by mail and I had no time to get that."

"You'd go to jail if they found that you'd

been fooling with the mails," said Ember. He did not raise his eyes as he spoke; if he had he would have seen in Murden's light-coloured eyes an expression that meant murder. The awful light died out before Murden spoke again, recovering his easy serene tones without visible effort:

"I'm postmaster and storekeeper at Amber Lake, and I guess I show my faith in my friends by doin' what I have did," he said with dignity. "Is there skunks among my friends, Harve Ember?"

"No," replied Ember hastily.

The thought of treachery had never entered his mind and now, at the covert suggestion of such a possibility, he found himself more strongly committed to Murden and his schemes than before. He was already in a secret shared by five; he was already a party to conspiracy. Even should he refuse and draw out, he would still bear his burden of the secret, and perhaps the responsibility for success or failure, without

sharing possible profits. The outlook was unattractive; he was too inert, too apathetic in character to willingly enter any scheme that required thought and exertion, or that entailed watchfulness or risk. Not that he was a physical coward as he was a mental one; he stopped at nothing when once set in motion; and like many weak characters, when goaded by a stronger influence, he was capable of attempting anything.

Once roused and driven into action, weak natures, unable to sustain the impetus, become merged in the will that drives them.

There were two things that influenced Ember,—Murden, and drink. He had never resisted either very long; it was not likely he would resist them combined. Murden had moulded him for years; Murden had driven him to forgery; Murden had kept him in drink; Murden had loaned him money, taking city land as security until payment fell due. Then he had taken the security, but without losing his grip on his

victim. And so at last Harvey Ember had come to be his creature. The very shanty in the Barrens belonged to Murden; everything in it was Murden's, too, except Rose Ember;—and he expected to acquire her in time, but as yet he had carefully avoided broaching that subject to either Miss Ember or her father. Did Ember suspect it? Was that why he shrank from telling Murden that Rose had not yet left Sark's? Weak natures recoil from sounding the shallows of their own characters; weak minds refrain from mental surveys.

Ember drank and brooded, doggedly aware that Dagberg and Murden were awaiting his pleasure. He filled his glass slowly, drained it slowly, enjoying the weak triumph of keeping his masters waiting.

Murden humoured him; he and Dagberg, seeing that the game was theirs, began a whispered consultation that lasted long enough to irritate Ember's vanity.

"Stop that!" he said thickly; "if I'm in

this thing, say so,—if I'm not, drop that side talk, do you hear?"

"Certainly, Harve," said Murden readily, "and"—looking at his great silver watch—"I think you had better start before Sark prowls off after dinner with his bull's-eye lantern and that fool of a professor." And at last Ember consented to put on his hat.

Murden watched him narrowly, regretting that he had allowed Ember so much liquor.

"You understand the importance of this?" he asked, as Ember passed him toward the open door.

"I want no advice," said Ember; "give me that glass, do you hear?"

He drank again, slowly, with a malicious side glance at Murden. Then he set the glass on the table.

"Suppose," he said, "that Sark won't sell."

"He will—to you," replied Murden coolly.

"All right; but suppose he won't?"

Murden glanced across the table at Dagberg. The latter returned his glance ferociously.

"In that case," observed Murden, "he will have to quit that land—and the country too."

Ember's morose face grew sharper. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I mean—the White Riders," said Murden with a laugh.

After a pause, Ember said: "There are only six of us."

"There's all Weazeltown to draw from—for a dollar a Weazel," said Murden.

"You mean to run him out?"

"Something of that sort."

"And make him sell?"

"I rather guess so."

Ember, sober for the moment, stared from Murden to Dagberg.

"Suppose you can't?"

"I guess," said Murden amiably, "that a million is worth trying for. But it ain't

going to come to that: he'll sell you back your land if you weep a lot over the old old homestead."

Ember turned on his heel and left the house. Passing the two horses hitched to the porch post, he hesitated, then sheered to the south and struck out into the darkness.

In the unpainted house Murden and Dagberg waited. Neither spoke. Dagberg, with animal curiosity, let his bleared Teutonic eyes wander over the pretty interior of the room, his dull intelligence grappling with its details. There was a piano there, books in chintz-bordered shelves, a woman's work-table covered with silks and yarn, a sewing machine, and a dainty mahogany desk. Dining-room, parlour, library and sitting-room in one, the square chamber was still attractive and pretty if a trifle incongruous.

Murden paid little attention to the room. Once he drank a swallow of undiluted

whisky, and offered the bottle to Dagberg in silence.

There was scarcely a sound in the house save the heavy breathing of the German. Outside the horses stamped impatiently beside the porch. A gilt clock over the fireplace ticked in the stillness. An hour passed; Dagberg was breathing deeply, on the borders of that heavy slumber that men of his kind never cross. He slept awake, as burly dogs sleep; he heard the clock tick and the snort of his horse from the porch, but he slept, nevertheless, a fierce, alert, dreamless sleep that breaks at the echo of a whisper.

The second hour had scarcely ended in a tiny chime from the gilt clock when Ember lurched into the room, and snatched his glass from the table. Dagberg, whose great fist had already closed on the weapon in his pocket, glared at him in silence; Murden's heavy jaw tightened until the muscles stood out under his cheek bones.

"Well, Harve?" he said quietly.

"He won't sell!" cried Ember, turning on him. "He sat there a-looking at me while I made a fool of myself with the homestead business. Then he nodded and said he'd sell my land back to me if I was so fond of it,—on one condition,—and that was that I must promise never to share it or its profits with anybody but my daughter. Then," continued Ember, clenching his fist, "I told him I'd do as I pleased with anything I owned, and he told me to take it or leave it on his conditions."

"He insulted you," said Murden thoughtfully.

"He did!—by heavens! he did," said Ember, thickly; "I am a gentleman as well as he! I told him so; I told him it was an insult! Then he looked at me, damn him! —he looked at me as if I were drunk!"

Murden said nothing; Dagberg, unmoved, shoved his weapon deeper into his side pocket, and gaped into the empty fireplace.

"One thing," said Ember, striking the table with his double fist, "Rose shall never enter his door again!"

"Are you crazy?" said Murden sharply; "she *must* go. And you must go too—to-morrow—and apologize for being drunk as a fiddler's wench."

Then Ember fell into a rage so violent that it annoyed even the stolid Dagberg; and he went out to the porch, preferring the quiet of the star-lit Barrens to the tumult within.

When, a few minutes later, Murden and Ember joined him, it was plain that Murden had had his way again.

Harve," he said, mounting his horse with the lazy agility of a puma, "he's promised to sell you the land; wait till to-morrow when you're sober, and then go to him and tell him how sorry you are that you was drunk and disorderly. Tell him you won't share the profits with nobody except Rose, and I'll fix it up all right after you get the land."

"And—suppose he won't sell?"

"Then the White Riders will meet once more I guess," laughed Murden.

"If you're going to meet I suppose you'll meet here, won't you?" asked Ember fretfully.

"Naturally," said Murden in his placid voice. "You know the call? Make it, Dagberg."

The German threw his heavy head back; from between his coarse lips a low sweet bird-note floated, strangely melodious and tender.

With a gesture, half menace, half caution, Murden wheeled his horse out into the waste of star-lit moorland; Dagberg followed; darkness blotted them out from Ember's sight long before the drumming hoof-beats died away in the night's blue solitude.

At a motion from Murden they wheeled east when they reached the creek.

"I ain't easy, Fritz," whispered Murden; "something tells me to ride by Sark's.

But," he added, " we'll keep to the Barrens ; I don't want to meet any one along the road to-night."

The lights of Sark's, on the hill above the Spook Bridge, guided them. They dismounted in the alders at the foot of the hill, and Dagberg took the bridles.

" I'll be back in a few minutes," motioned Murden ; " I'll give the call if I want you quick ; " and he started silently up the hill. Suddenly he crouched; a dark form loomed up in silhouette against Sark's lighted windows. The figure approached him—a woman, walking straight out into the Barrens. When she had passed he stood up and gazed after her. He knew her ; she was Ember's daughter, Rose.

" The lying fool," thought Murden, " afraid to tell me Rose was at Sark's. I guess that shows he knows what I'm after," he mused complacently, and crept up to the dark house on the hill.

He had come from sheer instinct, yet he

scarcely expected to find anything of interest there. He prowled around the house once, then, inserting his strong fingers between the slats of the blinds which closed the windows of Sark's parlour, cautiously opened them.

What he saw deprived him of breath for a moment; he stood spellbound, eyes starting from their narrow sockets. After a second or two he noiselessly unhooked the blinds, crept nearer, slowly and stealthily raised the sash, and, squatting under the window, listened. Sark was speaking; he heard every word:

"I do not understand why you, Mr. Guernsey, or you, Mr. Creed, have come here to-night to offer me much more than my land is worth. Doubtless you know where your interest lies; I am not prepared to say that the land may not be worth to you more than you offer. What your reasons may be I shall not question; I simply do not care to sell."

"It's agin' all reason!" said Guernsey, exasperated. "Ain't I offerin' you ten times what you paid Harve Ember! I want the sweet-fern, an' I expect to pay for it. You've got me; you can fix your price. The crop is run low on our side of the lake, an' we've orders at the Distillery for ten times our crop. Come, come, Mr. Sark, name your price an' me an' Creed will swaller our medicine."

"Mr. Guernsey," replied Sark; "I am not a shopkeeper. Profit and loss concern me little, speculation is equally unattractive. I came here to get away from people who buy and sell; I have no desire to increase my income, to invest any money, or to argue with you concerning my reasons or my private affairs. I speak plainly because neither you nor Mr. Creed have ever before shown me the slightest courtesy—no—not even the decent recognition of a neighbour. I came here alone, and you took pains to add to my inconveniences, because you feared a com-

petitor. You practically closed Murden's store to me, compelling me to pay heavily for transportation.

"In return I have never molested you, even when your men cut fern on my land. I permit you to use my private road to the Water Tower; I never interfere with your cattle when you pasture them on my hills. But there is one thing I will not permit, and that is any invasion of my privacy. I am glad to have you as neighbours, I am glad to extend every courtesy in my power, I am very willing to remain friendly with you. But I must refuse to sell my land, and I trust you will not find, in my refusal, a reason for offence."

"Mr. Sark," blurted out Guernsey, "I'll give you half a million dollars for your land."

There was a silence; Murden, under the window, set his white teeth.

"Are you mad?" said Sark's cool voice.

"Well, if I am I guess it won't cost you

nothin'," wheezed Guernsey. "I stand here offerin' you half a million for them fern-lands,—and Joshua Creed is my witness. You drove me to it—it ain't business nohow —but the offer is made and I stand by it!"

There was another pause. Presently Sark said: "I would do it, and move away with pleasure. I'm tired of the place; it is too full of buying and selling and money-making and starvation wages, to be agreeable to me. I sought quiet; I find Mr. Guernsey and Mr. Creed wringing dollars out of the edge of the wilderness. Yes, I would be glad to go somewhere else. But I cannot sell the land, and I will tell you why. Mr. Ember sold it to me; he cares for it, I fancy, and I promised him, if he ever was ready to buy it, that he should have it at the price I paid him for it,—under a certain condition. This very evening he came, viciously drunk, to ask for it. I said he might have it for himself and his daughter. He was impudent and I turned him out.

Now, if you wish to buy the land of Ember, I shall not interfere. I will sell him the land again as I promised, and he may sell it to you for your half million if he wishes. But there are two conditions: first, every cent of the money you pay him must be invested in his daughter's name, not to be touched without her consent; second: that I am not to be disturbed in this place for one year, beginning with to-morrow morning."

"I witness that there bargain," broke in Creed's hard dry voice.

Guernsey fairly bellowed his satisfaction, interrupting Creed's eager suggestions, until Murden, doubled up under the window, silently cursed him for a bawling bull-calf.

Out of the tumult came Sark's clean cut voice, presently:

"My word is sufficient, Mr. Creed; if you don't put that pen and ink down I shall be obliged to show you the door."

At last the two financiers, apparently satisfied, moved toward the outer hallway,

and Murden, gathering himself together, crept like a shadow under the fence and sprang down the hillside, but not towards the alders where Dagberg and the horses were hidden. Instead, he skirted Sark's three hot-houses, swung north, jumped the spring brook, and hurried down the road to the Spook Bridge.

Scarcely had he leaped lightly upon the bridge, when the sound of wheels warned him, and he saw the lights of Guernsey's double buggy rounding the hill below Sark's.

Guernsey and Creed were disputing as they drove up, charging each other with greed and bad faith. Neither had lost a moment in using the information that the *Star* had given them, and both were amazed and enraged to meet in Sark's parlour bound on the same errand.

"You allers was a bran-fed hog!" said Creed, closing the dispute. "Mind where you're a-drivin'; Dan'l,—look out!"

At that instant Murden laid his hand on the horse's bridle.

"Who's that?" cried Guernsey, frightened.

"It's Murden," said Creed, peering ahead; "want a lift, Mike?"

"Yes, I want a lift," replied Murden, springing lightly into the broad seat behind them. "I want more, too," he added.

"Eh?" queried Creed, shutting his lean jaw in alarm.

"And I won't waste no time about it," continued Murden, calmly; "I want to be took in as third partner on that fern deal, share and share alike. No use looking at me like a scared screech-owl; I mean it. Take me in and the deal's a go; crowd me out and Ember won't pay one cent for the land nor sell it to you either!"

After a long silence, broken at times by the startled spasmodic grunts of Guernsey, Creed drew rein.

"You can git out, Murden," he said.

"There ain't no power on earth to prevent me lendin' Ember the money for to buy that land, an' there ain't no power on earth to prevent him from pocketin' his half million. You can't do nothin'! Harm him and I'll jail ye! Blackmail me and into jail you go! Sark's word is good as U. S. bonds. Go an' tell him the railroad is a-comin', and he won't budge from his word,—no, not for fifty millions! So," he added, "you can jest git out, Mr. Murden, an' mosey to hell at your perlite convenience!"

Murden quietly descended. "I ask you again to let me in, share and share," he said.

"An' again I sez perlitely," replied Creed, "do your wust!"

"If you don't," said Murden, "that deal is dead!"

"Drive on, Dan'l," said Creed grimly; "the night air ain't good for Mr. Murden's delicate lungs."

"You won't?" repeated Murden. "I warn you I can stop that deal."

"When you do it," replied Creed, "there'll be skatin' in hell."

And Guernsey, reassured, gathered up the reins into his fat hands and drove on. Murden looked after them until their sidelights disappeared around the lake thickets. Then, for he had much to do before morning, he started swiftly back toward the alder thickets where Dagberg and the horses were waiting. A moment later a low thrilling bird-call floated out over the misty Barrens.

CHAPTER III

TROUBLE CONTINUES

IN WHICH JOHN SARK LEARNS SOMETHING CONCERNING THE METHODS OF EXPERTS IN FINANCE

THE next morning, just as Rose Ember was leaving her father's unpainted house on the Barrens, Joshua Creed and Daniel Guernsey drove furiously up to the porch. There was no road to Ember's from the lake, and the drive over the spongy tussocks and stunted shrubs of the waste had shaken Guernsey into a demoralised mass of moaning flesh smothered, at intervals, by a buffalo robe. He emerged as the dog-cart stopped, and, at the same moment, Rose Ember came out of the door.

"Is your pa in?" asked Guernsey, sourly, as Rose passed, giving both men a quiet glance of recognition. She stopped short, looking from Creed to Guernsey with a singular intentness that puzzled the former.

"I guess you know who I am?" observed Creed, with a hard grimace that was meant for civility.

"Yes," said Rose Ember, recovering her composure.

"Wa-al," cut in Guernsey, "I asked you was your pa in, didn't I?"

"Why do you wish to see Mr. Ember?" replied Rose.

"Business," said Creed, trying to smile till it hurt his hard jaw. "A word," he continued playfully, "which ain't in the bright lexicon of the fair sect;" and he executed a wink with one horny eyelid.

"It's all the same if he's drunk," added Guernsey brutally; "as long as he can sign his name he'll do for us, I guess."

A wave of crimson swept over the girl's neck and face. Both hands tightened spasmodically, and her eyes filled. But she set her teeth, crushing back the tears, and, without a word, turned away into the Barrens.

Creed swung around to watch the superb poise of her splendid young figure, the free play of hip and limb, the sunlight on her full white neck.

"What did you go to insult her for?" he barked, jerking his head about to face Guernsey. "You always was a disgustin' creeter with the sect."

"Sect be blowed!" observed Guernsey, clambering out of the dog-cart and waddling into the house without ceremony.

Creed sat silent, listening to Guernsey's hoarse bellowing for Ember, an angry glitter in his small sunken eyes.

In a few moments the president reappeared, mopping his apoplectic face.

"He hain't slep' here; I seen his bed.

The drunken fool has went to Murden's an' that's what he done, mark my words."

"Git in," said Creed, thin lips compressed, gathering up the reins.

With groans of distress Guernsey managed to hoist himself into the dog-cart, and Creed turned the horse northward with a vicious cut of the whip.

"Don't—don't bump that way! Joshua, don't—you—do—it,—or I'll—git out right here!" protested Guernsey.

"This hain't no bullyvard," said Creed, contemptuously; "bounce and be damned, Dan'l Guernsey."

Presently he said again: "And don't you speak to that gal like a hog either, Dan'l Guernsey. Perliteness is a jool, you fool!"

"Hey?" cried the president, puzzled at Creed's extraordinary urbanity.

Then a horrible suspicion began to dawn on Guernsey. Could the gaunt widower be plotting a financial manœuvre to include this

young girl? Did Joshua Creed contemplate marrying her as soon as she had received her half million? With a third interest in Sark's fern-lands and a wife with half a million as dowry, would Creed be able to play him some business trick which his fat brain could neither divine nor forestall?

"She's a huzzy," said Guernsey, hastily; "she's thick with that fellow Sark; sich galivantin' and goin's-on I never see! It's scandalous, her a-working for young Sark, yes, it is!"

A dull red mantled Creed's dry cheeks.

"Don't you think so?" demanded Guernsey eagerly.

Creed shut his inflexible jaws.

"He means to marry her!" thought Guernsey in alarm; "I'd be a fool to put this deal through and make him rich. Oh, Lord, what is he trying to do to me!"

Indignant, thoroughly frightened, distracted at the idea of losing the deal, and equally afraid to close the bargain with the

prospect of Creed's marrying the girl, Guernsey, hanging frantically to the side-bars of the jolting cart, panted and grunted and worried until they drew up at Murden's store. What on earth should he do? He must decide quickly. If he had only kept a decent tongue in his head he might have married the girl himself. Suppose he risked it anyway? He was richer than Creed,—younger too. He could smooth any little insult out with a check—if it were big enough.

"So help me heavins!" he muttered, "I'll give him a run for his money—the sneakin' fox! I guess I can do a little marryin,' too! I guess I know the sect as well as him, anyway. I guess——"

"Air you comin,' Dan'l Guernsey?" asked Creed for the third time.

Guernsey plunged heavily to the store platform, and, wiping his face on his overcoat sleeve, entered, followed by Creed.

There was not much light in the store;

the heavy atmosphere smelled of sugar and onions and big dry strings of hams hanging in rows over the counter.

There were two men sitting before the cold stove; one had both feet on the lid,—that was Murden; the other was lying limply in his chair, his white, haggard face buried in his chest. It was Ember, splashed with mud from collar to ankle, sleeping off his debauch.

Creed greeted Murden with a sinister side-glance, then, scowling, stepped forward and laid his hand on Ember's shoulder. The sleeping man was awake in an instant glaring wildly at Creed, who instinctively shrank back, not expecting to encounter such ferocity without apparent reason. Murden watched the proceedings with a sombre sneer on his heavy face, but said nothing.

"What do you want?" asked Ember, harshly;—"oh, it's you, Joshua Creed, is it?"

"I want to see you on business," replied

Creed; "will you jest step this way, Mr. Ember——"

"He needn't," observed Murden, rising lazily; "I can go out if I'm intruding—in my own house." He yawned, stretched his huge frame, passed Guernsey with a contemptuous smile, and sauntered out to the road to find a seat on a pile of lumber. His position commanded a view of the interior of his own store, but he was out of earshot,—unless the three men intended to confer in shouts.

Before Joshua Creed had moistened his dry lips with his tongue, preliminary to broaching the subject of their visit, Ember began pettishly: "There's no use coming to me about that fern-land. I won't sell it when I get it, so you can save yourself the trouble of argument. Besides, I'm sleepy."

Something resembling partial paralysis had taken possession of Guernsey at Ember's first word. Creed, unwilling to credit his large mottled ears, gaped stupidly at Ember,

apparently hypnotised by the pallid face that confronted his.

"You—won't—sell?" he managed to jerk out at last.

"No," said Ember sullenly.

A hysterical bellow from Guernsey drowned Creed's words for a moment, but he raised his rasping voice and fairly shouted in Ember's face:

"Half a million! Are you crazy? Don't you want to be rich? Air you in your right mind, Harve Ember?"

"What good does the half million do me?" inquired Ember. "Do you think I'm a fool? I'm not presenting my daughter with half a million dollars to please you. Crazy? Yes, I would be, to sell a million for half a million that I can't touch. I'll buy my land back—and work it too, without your advice, Joshua Creed!"

"But you hain't got no capital!" bawled Guernsey; "you can't go a-working of them hills without no plant! Can he, Joshua?"

"If Murden put you up to this," added Creed with a hideous grimace, "it's because he can't make nothin' out of this here deal and he won't let you. Now you take my offer, Harvey Ember, or I'll get into that there dog-cart an' I'll drive to John Sark, an' I'll jest tell him about that there railroad what's comin' to Amber Lake."

Ember looked at him coolly: "I don't care. John Sark's word is good enough for me. And don't you worry about capital. Our company's formed already; want to see the list?"

He took a bit of brown wrapping paper from his pocket and held it up before Creed's little eyes. Then he read, drawling his words, and enjoying the silent fury of his auditors:

"Harvey Ember, Esquire, President.

"The Honorable Michael Murden, Vice-President.

"Mr. Spike Nitchel, Secretary.

"Mr. Con Nolan, Treasurer.

"Mr. Fritz Dagberg, Director at large."

He slowly folded the paper, sat down, and crossed his legs, smiling all the time into the hard eyes of Joshua Creed. He had always feared the man, and he found it very pleasant to affront him in safety.

"My!" sneered Creed, "you think you done a smart thing, don't you, Harve Ember?"

"Fairly, fairly so," replied Ember complacently. After a moment, however, the irony of Creed's smile began to make him a trifle uneasy, and he wondered whether Murden knew what he was about in advising him to refuse half a million dollars for a few tons of weed on another man's land.

"Air you good at figurin'?" asked Creed sarcastically.

"I reckon I am," said Ember, meeting his sneer with uncertain eyes: "what do you mean?"

"I mean jest this. You say that fern is worth a million. It ain't—but let that go.

Now I offer you half a million for it. You say no. Why? Because you and four other men mean to work it. Good!—very good! So you prefer to take the chance of havin' one-fifth of a million, to the sartinty of half a million all to yourself. Do you?"

Ember stood up hastily, his pale face twitching:

"But I don't get that half million; it goes to Rose——"

"Goes to nothin', " said Creed contemptuously; she ain't eighteen yet, is she? You leave that to me; I guess I can fix it with the right sort of lawyer."

As he spoke, Guernsey who knew his fellow-distiller, knew that he was lying—knew that Creed intended that Rose Ember should have the money, and that she should be his wife into the bargain. Should he balk the deal? Should he draw back, rather than risk the race with Creed for Rose Ember's money?

"Joshua!" he blurted out; but Creed turned on him furiously.

"Shut up your fat head!" he shouted; "ain't I doin' this business?" Then he veered around like a buzzard, adding argument to argument, reason to reason, piling logic on logic, till the very force of his violence overwhelmed the weaker man, and Ember whispered: "Hush! Hush! or you'll bring Murden back."

"Bring him back!" cried Creed; "what do I care for Murden! He's tryin' to rob you and you know it! Go out there and say I said so! Go out and tell him your goin' to sell the land and you know your business! Murden? What's he got to do with you and your money——"

"Hush!" said Ember, "don't talk like that. He's coming now—he's coming back. Don't say anything—don't say a word, I tell you; I'll do it—I guess—but don't say one word to Murden——"

He stopped suddenly as Murden strolled

into the store, straight up to him and laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"Air you as weak as hog-wash or air you not?" snarled Creed, seizing Ember's other shoulder.

Murden turned, pushed Creed into Guernsey with a sudden violence that brought a prolonged squeal and a grunt from the fat president, and then quietly led Ember into the darkened rear of the store, among the lumber and barrels and shadowy heaps of odds and ends.

"What did they say?" he asked in a pleasant voice.

"They said that half a million for Rose was better than chancing it for a fifth with you and Dagberg and the rest."

"And—what do you think?"

"Let me alone!" said Ember, flinging off Murden's hand on his shoulder. Then he stepped back, eying Murden sullenly.

"Did they tell you that they would fix it

so you could have the money yourself?" asked Murden.

Ember's sulky silence was answer enough. However, after a moment, he denied it.

"And you believed it?" continued Murden quietly.

Ember only eyed him askance.

"Very well," said Murden without the slightest display of anger.

Ember started to shamble past him furtively.

"Go on," said Murden with a good-humored laugh; "go on and make your bargain with Joshua Creed to rob your own daughter. You may find time to enjoy your money when you've done time for that little business of the signature, some years ago——"

Ember fell back, a sick horror on his bloodless face.

"Done—time——" he gasped.

"Yes—done time! Throw me over and I'll see you do it too!" Ember grasped at him but he flung him back.

"Is it me ye'll do!" continued Murden savagely, bursting into the brogue that always flared out when his rage was rising. "Is it thricks ye'll be playin' on me, ye white muzzled son of a whippet! Troth, then, I'll show ye a thrick and a dozen to beat it, mark that, me bucky-o!"

And still Ember's horrified eyes followed him as Murden shoved his hands into his pockets and started slowly toward the front of the store.

"Come back," stammered Ember in a whisper; "Mike, you wouldn't do that——"

"Faith an' I would, me buck!" replied Murden, tranquilly lighting a cigar; but Ember got him by the arm again and dragged him back into the dark among the dusty lumber.

"Who made me do it?" he demanded hoarsely; "who set me on, Mike Murden?"

There was a savage luminous stare in Murden's eyes that quenched Ember's smouldering fury; he dropped the arm he

was gripping and fell back a step, stumbling among the crates and boxes.

"Is it me or you who forged the——"

"Hush—don't, Mike!" pleaded Ember in an agonised whisper.

Murden said nothing more; he had his man where he wanted him. After a moment he sat down on a barrel, searching for a match to relight his cigar.

"I'm only saving you from being a fool," he said, unconsciously shedding his brogue with his anger. "Sit still a moment, Harve. Now,—here's a cigar—let that old buzzard Creed wait—I guess it won't hurt him to cool his claws while I have my turn—"

At that moment Guernsey bawled out that he wouldn't wait another moment.

"Oh, I guess you will," called Murden from the back of the store. Then he turned to Ember pleasantly:

"We have the game in our own hands; Sark has promised you to sell; we've got the

capital to start the distillery. Don't let Creed jockey you ; don't listen to Guernsey ; stick to your land and make your fortune, Harve, and stick to me, the best friend you ever had."

Although Ember's fright had subsided, he peered at Murden, still fascinated by the power he held over his destiny. Curiosity began to replace his uneasiness ; he wondered what Murden really meant to do. The ingenuity of the man oppressed Ember. He passed his hand over his damp forehead, striving to make out the strands of the web which he already began to feel growing stronger and tighter.

" Then you ain't going to run Sark out ? " he said presently.

" Not if he keeps his word to you."

" And if he won't ? "

" Then," said Murden with a short laugh " we'll make it hot for him."

He arose and took Ember familiarly by the arm. Together they strolled out to the

the stove, where Guernsey was waddling about and fuming, and where Creed stood stolidly staring at the floor.

"I won't sell," said Ember in a low voice, and passed hastily out of the store with Murden. Together they struck into the fields back of Dagberg's shanty, and, as they turned south toward Sark's, the dog-cart passed along the lake road at a furious pace, headed for the Spook Bridge.

"Let him have his talk with Sark," said Murden. "He ain't going to tell about that railroad yet. No fox stops his own earth to spite the hounds."

"If he does, do you think Sark will back out?" inquired Ember.

"I don't know,—I never knew an honest man very intimately," replied Murden with cynical candour; "but I guess John Sark fills the bill for ordinary honesty."

"Are you going to Sark's now?"

"No—you are going though."

"What for?" asked Ember faintly.

"To buy that land for yourself," replied Murden. "So long. I'll wait for you at the store, Harve."

The menace under the smile made Ember sick. He turned on his heel and struck out across the Barrens, feeling the leash of his master at every stride. The momentary revolt at the lash had left him weaker and more thoroughly cowed than ever. It was always so; each fresh encounter with Murden sapped the remaining dregs of resistance until he had become what he was, a creature too unstrung, too miserable to resent the depths of his own degradation.

Slowly he approached Sark's house; the dog-cart was already standing before the door, and he knew that Creed and Guernsey were there. What could they be saying to Sark?

He rang the outer bell; Molly Trig came and regarded him with disfavour. However, he was accommodated with a seat in the east parlour, where he sat drumming his stained

fingers on the window ledge until heavy steps in the tiled hallway roused him from his vacant retrospections; and he looked up to see Sark, followed by Creed and Guernsey, enter the hall to the left.

Sark nodded to him at once and beckoned him, while Creed set his lips and waited grimly, and Guernsey breathed hard.

"Make your offer now, Mr. Creed," said Sark impatiently.

"Will you take it?" asked Creed, turning to Ember. His great hard fists were trembling; he raised one bony finger and solemnly adjured Ember to accept the offer.

"I'll buy the land first," said Ember; "then I'll sell it—perhaps."

"No, you won't," cut in Sark; "you'll buy it under that condition or not at all!"

"You ask me to sell the very land I was reared on?" whimpered Ember, forcing a pathos that disgusted even Creed. "Do you think I care for the money——"

"I know how much you care for your land," said Sark. "And I know you too."

Ember met his eye steadily; he was learning the effrontery of roguery.

"Air you a-goin' to take my offer, Harve Ember?" said Creed at length.

"No," snapped Ember, "I'll keep that land myself."

"No, you won't!" shrieked Guernsey. "Sark won't sell if he knows his land is worth a million——"

"What?" exclaimed Sark incredulously, but Creed had shoved Guernsey from the door, down into the flower-beds where he waddled about bellowing threats at everybody until Mr. Batty, brandishing a rake, escorted him to the gate, and put him out into the road.

"Very well," said Creed, staring at Ember, pale as death; "I'll see that you don't get the land for Murden and Dagberg."

"The land is not for Murden and Dag-

berg," cut in Sark coldly; "it's for this man's daughter or—I shall keep it for myself."

He walked to the front door, glancing grimly at Guernsey's attempts to crawl into the dog-cart.

"I'll sell you that land, Ember," he said, "if you will sell it to Creed under the agreement in favour of Miss Ember. Will you do it?"

The miserable man hesitated; then the horror of Murden's threat blanched his face and he cried out: "No! no! no! Give me my land! If you don't, you'll pay for it!—if you don't, you'll never forget it! I warn you, do you hear? I warn——"

"Show the gentleman out, Molly," said Sark, curtly, and turned on his heel.

At the outer gate Creed suddenly seized Ember by the lapels of his coat and backed him roughly up against the fence. "What holt has Murden got on you!" he said, grinding his yellow teeth in fury,—"hey?

hey? What holt has he got on you? Why won't he let you sell? Hey?"

Ember tore himself loose, backing away over the dusty road, Creed following him with impotent gestures of menace and rage.

"You've spiled the deal!" he barked; "he won't sell now, he won't sell to nobody! Why d'ye do it? Crazy, hey? Drunk, hey? 'Fraid Murden would jail ye, hey?"

The last shot found its billet, and Ember turned livid.

"Oho!" growled Creed,—"so that's the why! Done somethin', an' afeared o' jail, hey?"

Suddenly Ember ceased retreating. Creed saw a look come into his face that meant despair, and he checked his own rage very quickly, recognizing it was prudent to do so.

"Look out," said Ember, in a slow colourless voice.

The desperate white face of the man had a curious effect on Creed; it scared him

and gave him satisfaction at the same time. Now he knew that Murden was blackmailing Ember; that it was Murden who had after all carried out his threat. There was but one thing to do; there was no time to hesitate either.

Guernsey had already painfully stowed himself away in the dog-cart; Creed hurried back to his fellow financier's side, clawed the reins loose, whirled the whip, and sent the great grey horse on a gallop back toward Murden's store at the head of the lake.

There was no breath left in Guernsey, so he could not swear at Creed, but he made awful faces at him as the cart flew over the stony road.

Murden was sitting on the steps of his store as Creed drove up. Dagberg was there, too, but he rose and shambled across the field to his own shanty when Creed descended, throwing the reins at Guernsey.

Murden surveyed him in silence, chewing

his unlighted cigar; Creed returned his stare with a curious grin of hatred that still concealed something of reluctant admiration for the man who had brought him to terms.

"What's your price?" said Creed at last, lowering his harsh voice.

Murden, unmoved, considered a moment, head bent slightly to one side.

"You know what I mean?" asked Creed bitterly.

"Of course," replied Murden.

He rose and descended the wooden steps, laying one heavy hand on the sweating horse.

"My terms are these: one third interest in the new fern lands, and one fifth interest in the distillery after I put ten thousand dollars into it. Take it or leave it."

Guernsey shuddered; Creed, brought to bay, waited until the crisis of silent fury had left his mind clear enough to reason.

But reasoning left Murden unmoved at

first, and it finally ended by tiring him. He took out his watch, calling Creed's attention to the position of the minute hand.

"I'll give you," he said, "one more minute."

That settled Creed, but he made a last attempt at terms:

"I'll do it, Murden, if you engage to keep away from Ember's daughter. She'll have half a million, but you shan't have that, no, by thunder!"

"Neither shall you!" blurted out Guernsey in alarm; "I guess I can marry too! I guess there hain't no law agin' it! I——"

Creed swung around with an evil leer, just as Murden snapped his watch.

"Is it done?" he asked coolly. "I'll make no contract to keep away from the girl. We've all an equal chance, but the first thing to do is to get John Sark out of the country, for if I know anything, that girl of Ember's is soft on him already!"

So the bargain was sealed, and Murden,

calmly dropping Ember, Dagberg, and the new company overboard, went up the road to meet Ember, returning from his unsuccessful mission to Sark.

"There is only one way left," said Murden pleasantly; "go back and give in to him, Harve. Let Creed pay Rose the money, and I'll see she doesn't keep it long."

So it came about that, after all, John Sark re-sold his land to Ember, for the price he had paid for it; and Creed and Guernsey bought the land in for half a million dollars; and that sum of money was deposited with John Sark for investment in the name of Rose Ember.

The matter was settled that very evening. Creed and Guernsey made strong but unavailing objections to the clause permitting Sark to retain possession of his house for one year from date, but Sark insisted, and they were obliged to consent.

After it was all over, and the attorney

from High Falls had disappeared with Guernsey, Sark stood up and turned quietly to Creed.

"I don't know why," he said, "you consider my land so valuable. I cannot believe that an active market for your essence, or even a corner in sweet-fern, could send the value of the raw weed up so fantastically. And now that the land is yours, may I ask you why it is so valuable?"

"You may, young man," broke in Creed with insulting patronage; "the U. & C. are going to build to Amber Lake and the land is worth more than a Klondike mine this very minute."

Sark's face did not change; he looked from Creed to Ember and then at the contracts lying folded and signed before him on the table.

"Are you sure the railroad is coming?" he asked.

"I guess so," grinned Creed; "I've got the company's plans and contracts in my

pocket." And he slapped his loose broadcloth coat until the grey dust filled the air and made him sneeze.

"So that is business, is it?" asked Sark, picking up the contracts and sorting out his own duplicates. "I promised Ember to sell him the land again for what I paid for it. He buys it for a few dollars, holding me to my word, knowing all the while what the land might be worth. Is it business? It seems rather ignoble to me, this conspiracy of men to buy a million for a few hundreds."

He accompanied Creed and Ember as far as the hall; neither spoke to him.

"However," he said, "I am glad for Miss Ember's sake. Good night, gentlemen; I congratulate you on your financial cleverness."

Creed parted from Ember at the gate, taking no pains to conceal his scorn of the miserable dupe, and Ember started homeward, wretched with his growing distrust of Murden.

He found Murden waiting for him under his own porch, and, at a gesture from that new financier, sat down on the damp piazza beside him.

"I've made a mistake," said Murden coolly; "there's only one way to get your daughter's money."

Ember looked at him in breathless fascination.

"The girl goes to Sark's too much," said Murden; "she doesn't know it, herself, but I know she's growing sweet on him."

Still Ember remained mute.

"Do you want him to marry her and walk off with her money? That's what his game is," said Murden brutally.

"You—you don't think that," blurted out the wretched man; "you won't let him do that, Murden!"

"No," said Murden quietly; "for I'll marry her myself if that's the only way to save the money."

After a long silence he saw that Ember

was weeping, head hanging on his breast. His shame had crushed him; he was tasting the last dregs now, impotent, broken, hopeless.

Deftly Murden fanned the last sparks of rage in Ember's degraded breast, cleverly he directed the man's weak anger against Sark.

"That fellow must go," he said; "I'll get your money for you then, but I can't while he stays and she goes to his house. He must quit the country now!—not in a year, but now! I've thrown over Dagberg and the others; you and I will share Rose's money, but we must throw a sop to Fritz and the rest."

"Yes, he must go!" cried Ember fiercely. "You once said you would run him out! I'll help you! I'll not stand his robbing me—I'll not sit here and see him, a rich man, take the bread out of my mouth!"

"I think," observed Murden pleasantly, "that the White Riders had better send him his first warning to-night."

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST WARNING

CONCERNING INSCRIPTIONS AND HIEROGLYPHICS, MODERN AND ANCIENT, WITH SIDE REMARKS ON THE NORTH AMERICAN VENUS

THEY went about their business quietly, but their horses made more or less stir on the dim lawn; and, when one grim rider, hideously disguised, nailed a bit of paper to the front door, it seemed certain that some of the inmates must have heard the muffled hammering.

A long sweet bird-call broke out from a thicket near the bridge; there came a trample of shod hoofs on the drive, the rattle and tinkle of scattering gravel, a dead-

deadened echo of the stampede across the meadow.

John Sark awoke in his dark bed.

His first impulse was to drag the pillow over his head as quickly as possible; his next—for he remained a reasoning individual, even when half asleep—was to find out what had awakened him.

Not in years had he been roused at such an hour; it made him mad to think of it, and the more he thought of it the madder he grew. He had his own theory concerning sleep; he was satisfied that the clodhopper's maxim:

> "Early to bed
> Early to rise—"

not only preserved that species from extinction but kept the visible supply of clodhoppers undiminished.

"If I lie here wondering why I woke up, how can I sleep?—and I desire to go to sleep, damn it!" muttered Sark.

And doubtless he would have gone tri-

umphantly to sleep had not a distant sound caught his ear, a dull regular thudding like the muffled gallop of horses over a wooden bridge.

He jumped out of bed and leaned from the window; the Spook Bridge, grey with lake vapour, loomed through the trees, spectral, misty, deserted. If anything had passed over it there was no sign now—yet, at moments, he seemed still to hear the beat of horses' feet, or it may have been the drumming of his own heart.

He was now thoroughly awake and proportionately dejected; nor did it allay his irritation to retire to bed and toss and thrash for an hour. At last finding sleep impossible, for his rising resentment increased his wakefulness every moment, he climbed out of bed once more, attempted to force a yawn, couldn't, and finally sat down in a chair by the open window, a prey to wrath.

From the window he could survey the Spook Bridge, and the morning vapours

marking the course of the spring brook until they were lost in grey lake fog ; he could see the dark Sagamore Hills, massed from the shadowy world of dawn, printed like low-lying clouds against the paling eastern sky ; and, far in the west, where pallid uncertain shadows wavered between earth and stars, he made out the dusky edges of the Barrens, that strange land of silence and desolation, wild, unexplored, immeasurable.

The damp breath of dawn stirred his hair ; the breeze smelled clean and cold, saturated with perfumes from an unknown wilderness, freshened by aromatic exhalations from lost lakes, tinctured with spruce, birch, hemlock, and the sweet deep spice of the fern.

Leaning there, both bare elbows on the window ledge, where beaded dew, topaz and amethyst, spread necklaces from vine to vine, he heard a bird awake somewhere far away in the Barrens,—an unknown bird to him—pirr-oo-it ! pir-oo-it !

" Never heard a note like it," he muttered

sulkily,—" pirr-oo-it! What kind of a bird is that I'd like to know ? "

Ornithology was not his province, but even had it been, he never could have identified that bird-note, a note he was destined to hear again, far out in the mystery of the Barrens,—and nearer too—here in his own garden.

The vapour on the lake was lifting ; he could see the ghostly outlines of Murden's store, the squat shape of Dagberg's shanty near the edge of the Barrens, and, on the high bank above Sweet Fern Creek, the abodes of Spike Mitchel and Con Nolan.

Three miles to the northwest, across the sweet-fern waste beyond the lake, the unlovely bulk of the distillery rose, its native ugliness softened by the demi-twilight.

Musing there by the window, he looked at the great shapeless building where wild sweet-fern was converted into aromatic drops, to the moderate profit of the Distilling Company.

He thought of the two financiers and their visit. He could not see Guernsey's house; it stood behind the distillery. Creed's mansion also was hidden among the trees above the eastern shore of the lake.

Sark bore them no ill-will because they had never taken the trouble to be decent to him. When he thought of them at all he thought of them as two shrewd men who had seen Fortune hiding among the spicy weeds, that grew wild, far as the eye could see. They could take the land; he would not interfere with any fortune that smiled on Rose Ember. Besides, a year of peace was guaranteed to him.

The sun rose above the lake; the golden water was all starred and sprayed with splashes from rising fish. He watched one heavy trout jumping persistently in the same spot not a yard from his boat-house below the Spook Bridge.

The antics of the fish put him into better humour; the full melody of bird music from

every thicket soothed his irritation. He sniffed the sweetened breeze; a desire seized him to go out and wade in the dew on the lawn. Molly would not be about for an hour; Mr. Batty never arose unless somebody kicked at his door; there would be nobody to witness Sark's lambkin gambols.

He rolled up his pajamas, stepped out of his crash bath slippers, and stole to the front door, upon cavorting bent, beaming bucolic beatitude.

As he opened the door and turned around to close it, he was surprised to observe a square sheet of brown wrapping paper tacked to the panels just above the knob. There was an inscription on the paper; he read it twice, then read it again slowly.

DETH

MR SARK deeR SIR git Yu DAM CRANK Yu aint no good and we dont

want you HEaR we guess. this is THE 1st WARNING SO NO MORE AT PRESENT

BY oRDER

CAPTING OF WHITE RIDERS

Mohawk Divishun

K. O. T. B.

Presently he sat down on the door-step and gazed thoughtfully at the lawn. Horses had stamped over it; fresh dirt lay on the gravel walk, flung there by steel hoofs. He noticed something white lying on the grass under the laurel hedge,—at first he thought it was a heavy bunch of blossoms torn off by his visitors, but when he drew on his bath slippers and went down the path he found, on the grass, a white mask, home-made but well made, with two strings as fasteners.

For ten or fifteen minutes he searched the lawn and the hedge, and then, finding noth-

ing more, he followed the road to the Spook Bridge. The blue clay road bore plenty of hoof-marks; certainly half a dozen horsemen had passed over it, probably more, unless he read the sign amiss. But, except for the hoof imprints, he discovered no new evidence, and he returned to the house, head bent, absently dangling the white mask by one string.

It was a cruel hour to arouse Mr. Batty; Sark went up-stairs and kicked at the first door on the left until a feeble voice expostulated:

"My conscience!" protested Mr. Batty, "now I'll leave it to you, Sark, whether this is right——"

"Come out!" said Sark briefly.

"I won't!" shouted Mr. Batty.

"As you like," replied Sark moving away.

"My conscience! Is anything wrong with the Venus?" asked Mr. Batty, opening the door a little way.

"No," said Sark, "the Venus is all right. Put on your panties and come into my room."

He went to his bedroom, laid the mask and insulting placard on the centre table, drew up a chair, and sat down, chin on wrist, searching for evidence within the evidence lying before him.

He was young yet, a few months past thirty, but already in the corner of his keen grey eyes lay two or three minute creases like those one notices in men who do much microscopic work or live much in the open air. He was doing the one; he had done the other. His head was a typical soldier's head, hair close clipped, mustache burnt to a crisp straw colour. One superficial characteristic of this man seemed to be a sort of immaculate negligence; he always appeared fresh and cool; he could wander through the woods all day and emerge spotless; he was one of those men to whom dust never sticks, whose hands never soil, who

never perspire, and who look smart in old clothes.

Mr. Batty, who, had he possessed the wardrobe of Solomon, would have worn it like a theatrical supernumerary, shuffled into Sark's room, clad in mouse-coloured déshabille and further adorned with round spectacles which, at certain angles, reflected daylight like extinct bull's-eye lanterns.

"My conscience!" he blurted, "do you think you're in the army again! No, I won't sit down for any man, living or dead! I've got three more hours sleep coming to me—no, I *won't* sit down—unless the Venus is——"

"The Venus is all right," said Sark, "and it's because I want to pay her undivided attention to-day that I'm going to dispose of this extra problem before working hours." He made a careless gesture toward the table; Mr. Batty's distracted eyes were diverted to the white mask. He examined it calmly; Sark motioned him to a seat and handed

him the design representing the popular conception of a human skull and thigh-bones.

"Joke?" inquired Mr. Batty after a judicial contemplation of the placard.

"Oh, no," said Sark; "White-caps."

"White-caps? What for?'

"I don't know. At first glance one might think that Ember had repented of the bargain and was attempting to blackmail me. But if that were so he wouldn't show his hand so clumsily. I found this on the front door; they probably made some racket putting it up and that must have aroused me. I heard them on the Spook Bridge: there's plenty of sign on the lawn. There were half a dozen horsemen, I think, probably more. I looked over the trail carelessly; it was made within an hour of the time I found their notice on my door."

Mr. Batty, perfectly aware that Sark had spent some seven years as a lieutenant of cavalry in Arizona, never dreamed of doubt-

ing his judgment respecting trails, but he had always been sceptical when asked to believe that, since the long strike, Mohawk County could again descend to lawlessness. From time to time reports of White-cap outrages filtered into the quiet household, vague reports in some provincial paper or the vaguer gossip of passing commercial travellers from the southern counties. Nothing however happened in Mohawk County to confirm the hints that the travelling brotherhood threw out, and Mr. Batty became very earnest and very angry when Sark had sometimes gravely twitted him about the lawlessness of his native county.

"Where there's smoke there's fire," said Sark, quietly, "but where there's fire there isn't always smoke—did you know that, Batty my boy? Come, don't scowl like an enraged tom-tit; look up and tell me what you find in that page of modern hieroglyphics."

"Find?" repeated Mr. Batty, "I find

a badly drawn skull and some tommy-rot!"

"And I," said Sark, examining the placard with eyes slightly puckered, "have found in it one or two interesting coincidences. To begin with, at least three people have collaborated on that work of art; one of them is a German, and one is either an Egyptian or an Indian. What do you think of that, Batsy?"

"I can see the Teutonic taint myself now that you speak of it," said Mr. Batty; "the German 'g' in 'git'——"

"Yes and the 't'; and also the 'g' in 'warning.' Do you notice those animals in the upper right-hand corner? I've seen Indians draw weasels like that. Have you ever heard of the denizens of a romantic little village about fifteen miles north of here? It is called Weazeltown, I believe."

Mr. Batty admitted that he had heard of the "weazels" of Weazeltown.

"Very well; they may have had a finger in this: as for those animals there, I would unhesitatingly pronounce them Indian work—were it not for those three drawings in the lower left-hand corner—you see how clearly they have outlined the dragon-fly?—why, Batty, you can name the very species——"

"Trimaculata!" said Mr. Batty eagerly; "caudal appendage and all."

"Exactly; accurate enough for a Japanese artist, yet more archaic; *too* accurate for an Indian—I mean in detail of execution, yet like an Indian to delineate some creature he is familiar with."

"The Barrens swarm with the Trimaculata," said Mr. Batty earnestly.

"I believe so. And if anybody asked my opinion concerning the nationality of the designer I should say Egyptian—some 2000 years B. C."

Mr. Batty looked at Sark, then at the placard, then at Sark.

"Now," continued Sark, "there is represented a beetle—a scarab you can see at a glance. That is not Indian-like in any way; there are few representatives of the family in this region, and certainly no such beetle as that. What are you staring at, Batty?"

"It is the sacred Egyptian scarabæus," said Mr. Batty solemnly.

Sark nodded to confirm the identification.

"But" he said, "what is that thing next to the scarab?"

They leaned over the design for a few moments in silence: then Mr. Batty said:

"Is it a tooth and roots?"

"What does the black portion represent?" queried Sark.

Finally they gave it up, and Sark was convinced that, if it represented anything at all, the design had not been executed by the Indian or the "Ancient Egyptian," as he called him.

"As for the skull and femurs—ordinary

home talent, I fancy—eh, Batsy? Reminds me of your best period in school."

"Bosh," said Mr. Batty, "what are you going to do about this thing, Sark?"

"Do? Nothing. I may see Ember. Of course we won't say anything to his daughter."

"But if these White Riders come here——"

"There are guns enough up-stairs, I reckon," observed Sark without emotion. Mr. Batty picked up the mask.

"See anything queer about it?" asked Sark.

"No, it's home-made?" suggested Mr. Batty cautiously.

"Yes, made out of a woman's cambric handkerchief, stiffened with crinoline from a woman's sleeve or skirt, tied with two ends of a corset lace; the brass points are left on each, and the manufacturer's initials and trade-mark—see? And finally the mask is scented slightly with that violet that they

mix in quinine for a hair tonic and sell to women."

"My conscience!" said Mr. Batty, "where did you learn so much? Oh, I forgot you were in the cavalry."

"Bosh!" said Sark, looking out of the window.

"Your deduction then is that the sex is in this matter?" asked Mr. Batty mildly.

"I think a woman made that mask—perhaps wore it,—who knows," returned Sark. "Go and dress and we'll call on Venus before breakfast, Batsy."

When Mr. Batty had retired Sark stripped, sponged, shaved minutely, and dressed. Somehow or other his linen always seemed cleaner than any other man's linen, and his worn knickerbockers and threadbare Scotch jacket appeared to have an effect that the tailors call "chaste" and shop-girls and very young artists call "swell."

"Come on, Batty," he called, giving his fresh necktie a twist with scarcely a glance

at the mirror; and in a moment or two they were in the third hot-house, which was really a glass-roofed shed filled with hundreds of gauze boxes, each box numbered and labeled.

Sark stopped halfway down the centre path before a shelf numbered "Exotic 21," bent his head slightly, and peered cautiously into a glass box faced with wire gauze. The box was labelled:

Actias Azteca; var: A. Astarte.
December 3d, 1897.

"Out?" inquired Mr. Batty in great excitement.

"No," said Sark, "the birth of Venus is postponed."

Mr. Batty peered into the box where a small egg-shaped object lay. It was the flimsy cocoon of what was to be a new moth—a sexless hybrid, the product of the splendid North American Luna moth Actias Luna and the tropical Actias Azteca—if it ever emerged from the cocoon.

The study of insects injurious to vegetation had left Sark a hopeless monomaniac on Entomology. Beginning with a desire to learn all about injurious insects in order to devise methods for their extermination, Sark had ended by developing and adding to the known species by cross-breeding and grafting and fussing. He pampered strange and hideous caterpillars with their favourite food, he even devised new luxuries for them. He built hot-houses to breed them in; he invented porous glass slides to keep out ichneumon flies, he drew them, painted them, photographed them, and pickled them. He stuffed and mounted grisly-looking caterpillars, preserving the perishable portions of their colour by painting; he modelled them in wax, then took casts, glazed or varnished the plaster, and coloured it until it was not possible to tell a motionless living larva from his reproduction.

Already he was known to the scientific world as an authority on certain species and

varieties; his marvellous experiments in grafting, although first suggested by Professor Exyze's clever operations on the pupæ of the Cecropia and Samia Cynthia, were carried to a period where he demonstrated that a living composite imago could be reared with the antennæ and head of the Io, the thorax of the Polyphemus, the abdomen of the Prometheus, and each separate wing of primaries and secondaries the completely developed wing of a distinct variety of some member of the Bombyx family.

This series of experiments opened to Mr. Batty's astigmatic vision a vista filled with multi-coloured diurnal lepidoptera, each individual stranger than the strangest nightmare that ever harassed an Entomologist.

"My conscience!" he whispered to Sark; "fancy the primaries of a Turnus and the secondaries of a Troilus!"

"It can be done, I believe," said Sark, convinced that they were, as yet, merely in the infancy of synthetic Entomology. He

took one last look at the cocoon where the mysterious North American Venus lay sleeping in her chrysalis.

"Here's Molly," said Mr. Batty looking up.

"Coffee is served, sir," came a demure voice from the greenhouse door.

"Is Miss Ember there?" asked Sark.

Molly's pretty mouth disclosed an edge of white teeth. "Miss Ember has just entered the garden, sir."

"Come on, Batty," said Sark, glancing out of the window toward the garden where a young lady was taking a short cut across the flower-beds, skirts discreetly lifted.

"Did you ever notice," said Mr. Batty "anything extraordinary about Rose Ember?"

"She's uncommonly clever," said Sark.

"Does she resemble anything in particular?" persisted Mr. Batty.

"Nothing except other young women—does she?" inquired Sark.

"My conscience!" said Mr. Batty, "don't you think she's handsome, Sark?"

"Most women are—I think," replied Sark.

"Bosh! most of them are plain and tiresome, and when they're young they're devils."

"All women look very pleasant to me," said Sark sincerely. "It takes seven years in the Indian frontier to appreciate woman in the abstract."

Mr. Batty, who had taught the elements of physiology for years in a feminine boarding school, and whose memory of the tortures he had undergone left him with a well-developed dread of anything feminine, sniffed and followed Sark from the hot-house. Rose Ember crossed the lawn ahead of them and entered the house. "If you should buy a plaster head of the Venus of Milo and tint it and put in blue-glass eyes, and paint the hair with gold paint you'd have a good portrait bust of Miss Embers," said Mr. Batty.

"But I don't want one," remonstrated Sark.

"You don't have to have it," said Mr. Batty; "she's probably as devilish as all the rest."

"She does her work, that's all I know," said Sark simply. "As for being a North American Venus that may be true, but the Venus in hot-house number three is the safest one for you, Batsy."

"How about yourself?" retorted Mr. Batty.

"There's mighty little sentiment in me," replied Sark without embarrassment.

"I guess that's true," admitted Mr. Batty, "and what amazes me is that, after years of hell in that female boarding school, I love the fiends that tormented me—that is the good-looking ones—and if ever I get over my fear of women I'll be a devil among the sex—positively I will, Sark."

In his earnestness he turned a delicate shell pink.

Sark, absent-minded, nodded pleasantly and entered the house.

"Good morning, Miss Ember," he said; "after breakfast I should like your opinion on the Astarte cocoon. I may decide to examine it if our Venus is not born this week. Permit me, Miss Ember—this is your armchair—Mr. Batty, will you say grace?"

"For what we are about to receive—" bleated Mr. Batty as though he harboured a horrid suspicion that his own portion contained prussic acid: and then Sark seated Rose Ember with that pleasant impersonal deference that women admire but do not always find perfectly satisfying.

CHAPTER V

THE NORTH AMERICAN VENUS

CONTAINING MORAL AND SCIENTIFIC OBSERVATIONS BOTH DELICATELY JUDICIOUS AND SINGULARLY SAPIENT

THE breakfast table was pretty enough; snowy mounds of laurel bordered with sweet-fern made the decorations a trifle prim; in fact, there was a certain primness in the air that morning, for Rose Ember's thick golden hair was brushed more severely Greek than usual, and Sark's white waistcoat added more starch than was necessary to the breakfast rites, and Mr. Batty folded his hands and gazed absently at vacancy through the round disks of his spectacles.

The deep sweet spice of the fern filled the

room, exhilarating as ocean ozone. Reserve and apathy seldom endured long under the stimulus of this wild tonic from the Barrens: Sark brightened up as Rose Ember poured his coffee, and Mr. Batty abandoned wool-gathering long enough to pounce upon his muffin and re-butter it energetically.

As for Rose, the sadness of her home life was always followed by a quick reaction when the early morning brought her across the Barrens to Sark's. She was tall and very young, with the wild rose-colour in her cheeks and two clear wide eyes that sometimes in retrospective moments grew pensive and heavy-lidded. Free-limbed, red-lipped, and healthy in mind and body, this Mohawk County maid, with her full white neck and exquisite Greek head, had at first reduced Mr. Batty to a state of mind only to be described as drivelling.

He was better now, though far from strong.

Sark had always thought her "a perfect

specimen of the species;" it refreshed his tired eyes to look up from microscope and note-book and see this smiling rosy incarnation of Greek art waiting beside his table for instructions regarding some great soft-winged moth staring at the world through amber eyes from the depths of a gauze box.

Once or twice, when circumstances made it impossible for him to work, he wondered, contemplating her vaguely, why he had not found time to become sentimental over her. It was exactly that—he had not had time. The absorbing imperative interest in his work dulled the finer perceptions of human interest, the excitement in rearing a grafted moth left him no inclination for further excitement. His hopes, doubts, fears, were already bespoken; he had nothing but embryo emotions left for anybody or anything outside of his profession and the individual genera which it covered. It was too bad, it was a mistake, and he often sus-

pected it. At such moments he would think to himself: "I'll just finish this Cecropia grafting and take a rest. Miss Ember must imagine I haven't a mental resource outside of playing wet-nurse to butterflies."

Mr. Batty gazed earnestly at Rose Ember through his spectacles. "Do you know," he said, reflecting with his head on his shoulder like a tomtit immersed in reverie—"I believe, Miss Ember, that I should have thoroughly enjoyed the delirious saturnalia of the Roman decadence."

"I don't know much about it," said Rose demurely;—"only the outlines as compiled for young ladies in the State Normal School—and I couldn't find anything very shocking even in the Latin notes at the back."

"It was a hair-raising period," said Sark, smiling at her in his absent-minded way.

"I should not object to hair-raising," observed Mr. Batty, whose despair at his premature baldness he concealed under a sprightly jocularity, intended to deceive.

"You *are* bald," said Sark, "and I'm getting as grey as Noah——"

He touched his temples as he spoke, smiling; yet, in his eyes, was the shadow that falls when a man at thirty measures the span of years backward and forward from youth to age.

"There are only two grey hairs on each side," said Rose Ember, speaking more emphatically than she had meant to.

After that, unaccountably annoyed at her own remark, she maintained a reserved silence until breakfast was ended.

"What are you going to do, Batty?" asked Sark, lighting his cigarette.

"I think," said Mr. Batty, "that I ought to test all those Io moths on the setting-board. They've been there two weeks."

"They're dry, then," said Sark. "Case them and put the Mexicans in the relaxing cupboard so you can set them to-morrow. Don't use steam."

"May I help you set the Mexicans?"

asked Rose, touching the tips of her white fingers to the water in the finger-bowl.

"They won't relax to-day," observed Sark; "I wish you'd get the instruments and come into number three."

"You're not going to tamper with the Astarte?" exclaimed Mr. Batty nervously.

"That's exactly what I am going to do. If there's anything wrong with the chrysalis I want to know it."

"Will you venture to open the cocoon?" asked Rose, delighted. "Oh, I shall be very glad to help you; I do hope the horrid ichneumon flies have not been hatching mischief with our Venus!"

"I don't know," replied Sark solemnly, "I watched over that caterpillar with the devotion of a parent from the minute it left the egg to the day it finished spinning its own cradle."

"You did all you could," said Mr. Batty sympathetically.

"You couldn't spin its own cocoon for it, you know," said Rose Ember mischievously.

"And you can't hatch it out like a hen," added Mr. Batty, not meaning to be flippant.

"You might try?" suggested Rose, trying to speak sentimentally. Sark looked up at her with sudden suspicion. He could only see the tip of one little ear; she was adjusting a hair-pin with a careless grace intimately and mysteriously feminine.

"I shall be in the third hot-house," he said briefly, and he left the dining-room by one door as Rose and Mr. Batty left by the other.

A small bird had managed to get into the third hot-house, and, when Rose entered with the case of scissors and forceps, she found Sark, disgusted, delivering his opinion of the bird to the bird itself:

"You yellow-headed thief, you haven't left a single caterpillar on those violets!

Do you think just because you're a Golden-winged Warbler you can pay your bill with your idiotic zee! zee! zee! Shut up! I don't care if your name is Helminthophila Chrysoptera!—you decadent Latin gormandizer—you ornithological Batty! Get out of my hot-house!"

"Goodness! What a Philippic!" exclaimed Rose, staring very hard at the small robber-bird, who, not at all embarrassed, regarded her amiably and said "Zee! zee! zee!"

"Zee—zee! Indeed! I zee—zee what you've been doing!" she said, lifting a reproachful finger, "you have eaten every single one of those poor Frillitaries. Fly away this minute!—you mortify me!"

Between them they hustled the impudent Warbler out, and Rose, flushed and excited, came back to the box where the cocoon of Actias Astarte, the wonderful North American Venus, reposed in all the majesty of embryotic inertia.

"It's most provoking," said Sark slowly, "to have a ridiculous bird breakfast off of one's rarest caterpillars."

It was annoying. The caterpillars of the rare Nitocris were modest exiles from Arizona, not at all intrusive,—so modest were they that they only came out to eat violet leaves in the evening. The common frog, chastest of individuals, is not more discreet in delicate situations than are the self-effacing larvæ of the Arizona Nitocris,—and then, to be set upon and greedily gobbled by a small bird with a yellow patch on his head!—it was as humiliating for the caterpillars as for Sark.

"I won't cut the cocoon until I cool down," said Sark, as Rose handed him a slender pair of curved scissors.

"May I?" she asked; "my hand is steady,—see!"

She held out a fresh, fragrant hand. Any man on earth would have been justified in taking it.

"You may try it," said Sark, looking hard at the white hand.

She opened the perforated glass door and picked up the small, egg-shaped bundle of silk. First, she removed the single dry leaf that partly wrapped it leaving on the golden brown silk an imprint of the leaf's vination. Next, she introduced the curved point of the scissors into the looser end of the cocoon, cutting slowly, carefully, a circular section from the case. The silken peeling fell, curling up like an apple-skin; the interior coating was polished and lacquered.

Sark had placed a soft cradle of cotton-wool on the table beside him, and now Rose, holding the cocoon carefully between her thumb and forefinger, gently reversed it, sliding the imprisoned chrysalis out and onto his new couch.

"Rose!" said Sark, calling her by her first name in his excitement, "the moth is breaking the shell already!"

It was true. Instead of a smooth, plump, polished chrysalis, varnished like a South American nut, the embryo Astarte was soft, very dark, and brittle-skinned. Already the head plates had cracked longitudinally, the short lateral cracks opened as they looked, and a mass of pink and white down emerged, slowly disclosing two jewelled eyes, followed by first one and then another of the fern-like antennæ.

The birth of Venus was at hand!

Downy legs, pink, and pale green, stretched out feebly, seeking support; the crackling translucent chrysalis slid from the body, the moth crawled toward a low hanging bunch of maple leaves, mounted the stem, crept under it, and hung, limp wings and body palpitating.

Two hours later, Sark lifted his head in silence; Rose impulsively stretched out her hand, and he took it, acknowledging the eager mute congratulation.

There hung the moth, fully expanded, a

superb hybrid with great translucent sea-green wings literally set with silver circles. It bore traces of its parents in the white silky body and long gauze prolongations or tails attached to the lower wings; but, in place of the lunate spots, both pairs of wings were studded with silvery moons, resembling in texture the spots on the under side of Argynnis Aphrodite.

"What a wondrous creature!" breathed Sark, awed at his own triumph.

"Beautiful—your Venus," sighed Rose, "but oh, what a pity it can't have little ones!"

Mr. Batty, who had entered on tip-toe, was having mild hysterics behind an orange tree loaded with blossoms, but, when he heard Rose's innocent remark, he suddenly grew very solemn.

Was unproductive beauty futile after all? Was there nothing better in life than to gape all day at the tarsus of a dead butterfly? Was Sark missing anything when

he spent his youth worshipping a sexless hybrid, named with unconscious irony, Astarte,—the Ashtoreth, prophetess of unbridled, ungirdled Aphrodite! He looked at Rose Ember through his spectacles; and Rose was fair to look upon.

"My heavens! Batty, I never felt so happy in all my life," said Sark, shaking his offered hand.

"Nor I," said Mr. Batty sentimentally; but he looked at Rose as he spoke, and his eyes were cloudy with affection.

All day long Sark sat beside his Venus, note-book in hand, alternately writing, and using his great magnifying glass on the motionless moth. He filled pages on the description of the discal areas alone; with amazement and joy he constituted the presence of androconia and recorded the discovery. A minute study of the vination might appear to many a hopeless undertaking without ruining the wings of the beautiful creature, but Sark had resources of his

own, and, with the aid of Rose Ember and an X-ray, the thing was accomplished without disturbing a single scale.

At last the veins and nervules, costal, subcostal, radial, median and sub-median, had been lettered and numbered; measurements made, compared and corrected, photograph after photograph taken of the moth in every possible position and from every angle. Rose made an independent investigation in the meanwhile, sketched certain positions of the feet and antennæ, and finally picked up the mass of notes and arranged them. She was tired; she numbered the sheets of paper mechanically, filing each in its proper place; and, when Sark looked up from his own labour, the notes were in order, the sketches sorted, and the lethal chamber stood ready to absorb the vital essence of the North American Venus.

"What a perfect jewel you are!" said Sark; "I don't know what on earth I am going to do without you——"

"Are you going to do without me?" said Rose, startled.

Sark bit his lip:

"I'll talk to you on that subject later," he said; "help me, now, for our lovely Venus is about to die."

The lethal chamber was a square crystal box; the bottom was covered with cyanide of potassium under a thin porous layer of plaster of Paris; the lid fitted perfectly air-tight; the atmosphere of the chamber was death.

Rose gently detached the leaf stem to which the moth was clinging; the broad wings expanded in a flash of alarm. "Now!" said Sark. He threw back the cover of the death trap; Rose laid moth and leaf on the bottom; the cover snapped. So, in the crystal box the lovely Venus sank into the never-ending sleep.

CHAPTER VI

A NEW ARRIVAL

IN WHICH ROSE EMBER LEARNS A NEW GAME AND MR. BATTY GIGGLES

When at length the great green moth had breathed its last in the crystal box, Sark lifted it with silver forceps and laid it on the table. Rose had the setting-board ready and the strips of oil-paper cut, but after consultation, Sark decided to mount it on a glass mould and seal it hermetically, leaving every section of wing and body visible. It took but a few minutes to prepare the glass sarcophagus and set the moth by means of glass weights with rounded edges.

"In two weeks," said Sark, "we'll adjust the covers;" and he opened his air-tight

disinfecting vault and placed the dead moth on the shelf.

Rose, contrary to her usual custom, did not linger to watch Sark, but washed her pink palms at the spout, dried them thoughtfully, and stepped out of the greenhouse into the late afternoon sunshine.

A breeze was blowing from the lake, bending the grass-blades on the hillside, turning tender poplar leaves silver-side skyward, and mowing furrow after furrow through acres of daisies. The white butterflies lost their bearings in the wind that blew them fluttering across the Barrens; a wood-duck, steering through the air, veered in the wind and plumped into the lake among the breeze-tossed lily pads.

Out of the splendid azure of the west, great white clouds crowded, squadron on squadron, standing gallantly on their course before the wind; and silvery flaws swept the water where the wind's wing-tips, trailing, brushed the blue surface of the lake.

But it was a very sober and subdued face that Rose lifted to the rolling heavens; the wind untwisted the bright tendrils of her hair and started a deeper tint on lip and cheek; it played with her grey wool skirt, it fluttered the ribbon at her belt, it frolicked from the tip of her nose to the points of her tan shoes, impudent, intrusive, importunate, sparing neither gown nor petticoat.

There may have been fairer pictures in the world; there may be fairer; but Mr. Batty, setting a rare polymorphic form of an exceedingly common butterfly, looked out of his window and softly vowed that Rose Ember in the June wind was the loveliest picture ever created. Some such idea may have occurred to John Sark, too, as he issued from the third greenhouse and walked to the brow of the grassy slope where Rose was standing.

She felt his presence before she saw or heard him, but she did not move. After a

moment, however, she asked him if he needed her; and he said, no.

"I believe," he said, "that I have been overworking; I shall not bother about those notes to-day."

She did not reply; he looked up at the big white clouds, he looked out at the tiny wind-squalls tracing eccentric trails across the lake, he saw the daisies furrowed in the wind, and the billows of grass sweeping the breezy hill.

"Lord! Lord!" he murmured to himself, "how young the world has grown!"

She had found a granite boulder, deep bedded, sparkling with mica, and she seated herself, daintily, her elbow on her knee, her wrist propping her delicate chin.

In her eyes the sky's blue had found its own deep tint reflected; she mused in silence, now absently counting the white clouds sailing, now following a wind-blown bee, now preoccupied, blue eyes dreaming, heavy-lidded, wistfully sweet.

The little grass birds came about her feet, alert when the wind fluttered her petticoat, but not alarmed; the wild hawk's shadow fell upon her lap, returning again and again; even the swallows left the lake and chased each other on the hillside, lacing the green grass with their shadows.

"What was it you meant when you spoke of my going away?" she asked; and her voice sounded like an echo, very far off.

"I came here to tell you," he said, "that I have sold the house and the land."

She did not turn; the wind frolicked with a burnished strand of her hair, then flung it glimmering against her paling cheek.

"I sold it to your father," he went on; "he resold it in your name. It brought a very large price; it brought half a million."

She did not move.

"You see," he continued, with the faintest touch of impatience, "you have a fortune in your own name. Under certain con-

ditions of the sale it fell to me to invest the money for you, and I have written for my old English friend, Reginald Lanark, to come here because I want his advice concerning it. Are you—satisfied with the arrangement? He'll be here this evening."

But she would neither turn nor speak, and he sat upon the grass and looked sulkily at the back of her head.

"Because," he added, "it can't be helped anyway. Your income will be a good one at any rate; you will have absolute control of both principal and interest on your twenty-first birthday—that is in three or four years. Meanwhile it has fallen to me to administer the funds, and I shall do it with much more circumspection than I should use in any matter pertaining to myself. Have you any suggestions to make, Miss Ember?"

Without moving she said: "Why should that prevent me from aiding you in your work?"

"At a salary?" he laughed; "why, Miss Ember, you are an heiress!"

"What of that?" she said quickly; "I like my work!"

She turned then, flushed, but self-possessed:

"The work will be for its own sake and not for money. It is what I have wished for since I came to help you."

He said nothing; she went on, gravely:

"You took me at first, not because you really expected me to aid you, but because I needed the money."

He protested, but she continued in the same serious voice:

"I know I have aided you a great deal; I know I have saved you labour and care and trouble——"

"You resuscitated those frozen exotics!" he said warmly.

"Yes; I found the proper food for the Polyommatus Dispar caterpillar that everybody in England believed to be extinct——"

"And you re-set those wretched Florida specimens!"

"And I proved that Arthemis variety to be local!"

"And you named it!" he exclaimed enthusiastically, *Nymphalis Sarkis!*"

"Indeed you deserved the honour!" she cried, with cheeks aglow.

They began to laugh, she shyly, he tentatively.

"I don't want you to stay away," he said, "but I supposed you might not care to come—now——"

"I do care," she insisted warmly; "I'm as much interested as you are. Don't you suppose I want to see those Nitocris caterpillars turn into chrysalids? You are very selfish, I think."

"Dear, dear Miss Ember!" he said earnestly, "believe me that the very idea of your not coming made me almost lose interest in every caterpillar I possess!"

He jumped up and began to walk to and fro, hands clasped behind his back, head bent, brow knit.

She watched him, wondering a little and a little disconcerted by his warmth. She had always found a discreet pleasure in his confidence, she was not unaware that his confidence was well placed. But, as she sat there on the granite rock, for the first time she found pleasure in looking at this tall, well-knit, sunburnt young man who had relinquished saddle and sabre to set his keen grey eye to a microscope.

Once she remembered having seen him in a tennis shirt, arms bare, hurling a base-ball at Mr. Batty, and she had thought him very muscular and a trifle too straight. Now she found his broad shoulders attractive, and even the sunburn on his forehead, below the white circle left by his hat, seemed to possess a certain curious and alarming fascination for her.

He was coming toward her now, the sun

at his back, and his long shadow fell across her knees.

"I want you to come," he said, "I shall miss you terribly if you stay away. But your father is not friendly to me, Miss Ember, and I believe he will not wish you to come. If he permits it, I shall welcome you thankfully."

"I shall come," said Rose, smiling, but her breath failed for a moment, and her little heart beat furiously.

As though her father could prevent her from coming! She had suffered enough without that—she had clung to her father through evil days, she had known the terror of a child shrinking before the vacant stare of a drunkard, she had tasted the shame of his disgrace, she had seen eyes averted from her in pity, she had heard careless contempt in the voices of those whom her father called his friends. In the crash of his hopes and fortunes she too had gone down; she had taken up her life again with him, there on

the edge of the Barrens, expecting nothing, crushed, humiliated, glad of the isolation. Then one day Sark had come, and the next day she had gone to him; and it seemed to her that the sun had been shining over Amber Lake from that first never-forgotten day.

Had it come to an end, this happiness that had sought her out, unsought?

"I will come!" she repeated obstinately, forgetting she had spoken.

Come? Indeed she would! Was it not enough to spend her nights in the sordid home on the Barrens? She loved her father, —she loved him with that fierce loyalty that had kept her at his side even when his own drunken associates shunned him—for his hopeless degradation. But she would not give up Sark!

Suddenly conscious of what it meant to her she turned sharply around, and the waves of crimson tingled across her face.

Was it Sark she feared to part with?

Was it true that the butterflies were nothing to her?

Sark, behind her, was speaking. She sat down on her granite boulder again, resolutely recovering her composure, forcing herself to stay and listen when she was quite aware that she would rather go away somewhere and lock a door between her and everybody until she had arranged her thoughts.

Sark was saying: "There is one thing that I ought to tell you about, and yet I feel almost ashamed to mention it. Last night some horsemen came here and nailed a paper to my door. It was a sort of threat, you know—and—and perhaps you might not care to come if the White-caps are going to quarrel with me."

She was listening now; the wind tore a burnished lock from its confining hairpin and set it blowing across her eyes, but she did not heed it.

"I fancy they may come again," con-

tinued Sark, "of course I shall not budge for them—and—and perhaps there might be trouble."

He was very apologetic, disliking to dignify the incident by repeating it to her, but he thought she ought to know it before she decided to continue as his assistant.

"I suspect nobody," he said; "I have no particular clue, except this——"

He drew the cambric mask from his pocket, and, stepping up beside her, laid it in her lap.

She did not touch it at first; suddenly she picked it up, held it a moment, then dropped it again in her lap.

"Do you think I have any fear?" she said unsteadily.

"Have you none?" he asked.

"None."

They were silent for a long time. The sun went down into the Barrens; the purple light wavered out across the waste.

Strings of birds passed overhead through a sky of palest rose; a field insect set up its strident monotone, almost at their feet. Down on the lake the fish were leaping and splashing after wind-wrecked gnats, and the night-hawks sailed and swooped and sheered the glimmering ripples with the faint rose glint on their white-barred wings. Far away in the darkening Barrens an owl repeated his ghostly call; a star shimmered through the waning after-glow.

Rose looked up into the air where the bats were soaring, darting, turning and tumbling among the midges, she looked out across the lake where a faint light, reflected in the water, grew imperceptibly yellower and brighter. Night was settling over all like a vast grey web.

He offered to bring her hat and jacket but she refused, saying she must go. For the first time since she had come to the house she declined to remain to dinner, say-

ing she was needed at home, that she was tired with the day's excitement, too, and was quite ready to sleep.

"I shall not know what to do without you at table——" blurted out Sark.

She turned to him with the first trace of coquetry, bidding him console himself with his expected guest.

"Lanark is all very well," said Sark moodily, walking back to the house with her, "but I had expected you to stay—I never had any idea you wouldn't."

"Why, I can't always preside at your table, you know," said Rose, trying not to feel excited at this new game she was learning with such alarming facility.

"Why not?" said Sark before he knew just what he was saying.

A delicious tremor of fear set Rose Ember's heart beating fast again.

"Because," she said without giving herself time to stammer, "you are going away in a year—and so am I."

"Where are you going?" he asked in consternation.

Rose turned her delicate nose skyward:

"Oh, how do I know yet?" she said airily.

John Sark felt himself on the brink of saying something important, and he certainly would have said it had not the form of Mr. Batty loomed up in the path before him.

Looking back on the situation some hours later he wondered just what it was he had been about to say. He could not remember, and it agitated him to forget, for he was certain that the observation had been very important. Instead, however, he said: "What the deuce are you up to, Batty?" in such an irritable voice that Mr. Batty apologised for doing nothing but existing, and Rose assumed a sudden cordiality toward him that Sark found vaguely distasteful.

"Reginald Lanark is here," said Mr. Batty; "he drove in from Heavy Falls."

"Well, what's Lanark got to say for himself?" asked Sark with an ungracious directness totally foreign to his nature. Somehow he associated Lanark's coming with Rose Ember's going away,—it was ridiculous, but he did—and it depressed him.

"He didn't say much," said Mr. Batty, "except that he was hungry. He swore when he said it."

"You'll be a very jolly company," said Rose Ember, handing her jacket to Mr. Batty; "you deserve one evening all to yourselves—oh, thank you, Mr. Batty, I can tuck in the sleeves."

Sark watched Mr. Batty aid her with her jacket in moody silence. She noticed his reticence; it pleased and frightened her at the same time.

"Good night, Mr. Batty," she said; then to Sark, "good night."

He said good night in a heavy, dignified manner that struck him as being slightly

silly, too. It struck Rose, however, differently; she felt suddenly very, very young, and that her youth was a reproach in his eyes.

After she had gone, Mr. Batty, leaning on Sark, almost skipped as he entered the house.

"Positively I feel the buoyancy of boyhood to-night," he said, and giggled as he said it, a proceeding that wearied Sark unutterably.

Lanark was standing in the smoking-room, scowling at the dining-room door when they entered.

"Upon my word!" he said, shaking hands viciously with Sark, "are you trying to starve me out, Jack? Give me food, for the love of Mike! I've driven from the Falls, man, on one of your damned Yankee buggies, and the shake-up I've had on an empty stomach has started a partial digestion of my own liver!"

"Look at that!" said Sark, "there's

your Englishman bawling for his roast beef, though the heavens fall. It's indecent, Reginald, but then you don't understand that. You'll go out with a four-ounce rod and catch your own breakfast in the morning anyhow, so come on!—come on, Batty! By Jingo, I feel like a subaltern of twenty and the old 7th Cavalry band playing 'Garryowen'!"

CHAPTER VII

MISS EMBER SEWS

A CHAPTER DEVOTED TO A FAMILY DISPUTE, AND A MIDNIGHT INTERVIEW

When Rose Ember reached her home on the Barrens, the last glimmer of daylight had faded from the sky, the night mists filled every hollow with spectral lakes, and the grey owls hooted in the hemlocks. The evening chill had already dulled the pungent odour of spruce and fern, and the rank, cold scent of the moorlands came creeping out of the west across the waste.

There was a lamp lighted in the living-room; she crossed the short veranda and entered. Her father sat at the table, cleaning the cylinder of a heavy revolver.

He had not expected to see her; she had never before returned until eight o'clock at the earliest, to cook his dinner for him.

"What's the matter?" he said sullenly; "I don't want to eat for two hours yet."

He drank too much to eat very much. About ten o'clock, however, he wanted his dinner, when he was sober. Rose saw at once that he was sober now. "I was tired," she said; "I have something to tell you, too."

She sat down on the piano stool, nervously stripping her gloves from her chilled hands.

"Why are you cleaning your revolver?" she asked suddenly.

"Because I need it," he said, drawing the oiled rag through the blue steel barrel.

For a moment she watched him without comment. He fitted the cylinder into the breach, tested the ejector, oiled it, tested the lock, then, lifting the weapon, snapped

it six times in rapid succession to try the self-cocking mechanism.

"Papa," she said, "what did the White Riders do last night?"

"I told you once," he said shortly.

"You told me the Riders were going to run a dangerous man out of the country."

"They are," he answered, stripping the lid from a new box of cartridges.

"What man?"

"Don't bother me," he said, and began to lay the cartridges in rows on the table-cloth.

"Are you going with them?" she persisted.

"Yes,—and by the way, I want you to make me a new mask; you needn't tear up another handkerchief; I got some stuff at Murden's this evening."

He began to fill a leather cartridge belt with the ammunition; she came over to the table, resting both hands heavily upon it.

"Who is the man?" she asked steadily.

"None of your business!" he snapped. But still she repeated her question until irritation seized him and he flung down the cartridge belt with an oath:

"I'll tell you who it is! It's that sneak John Sark, and we'll run him out of Amber Lake to a tune of our own whistling. And now let me tell you something; the man is after you to marry you and I won't have it, do you hear?"

Every word hurt her like the shameful sting of a lash, but she still replied in a steady voice:

"He has never spoken to me of that; I am nothing to him."

"You're something to him now," sneered Ember; "I suppose he has told you how he robbed me to make you an heiress. Don't you think he knew what he was about? What did he sell his land to me for when he knew something was in the wind. To keep his promise? Perhaps—and perhaps because he meant to keep his reputation for

a square man and get the money too. I tell you I won't have it!—I won't have him sneak in and pocket you and your half million!"

Rose had turned very white; suddenly it flashed upon her that Sark, for the first time since she had known him, had looked at her and spoken to her in a manner that she knew was more than disinterested. But the momentary shadow of suspicion shamed her, and she opened her voice in a passionate protest against the slander on Sark and on herself:

"It is not true,—it is cruel and wicked to say it! He cares nothing for money—he needs none; he who holds bargaining and buying and selling in contempt, do you think he would buy a woman for the money he himself has found for her in the wilderness! He never spoke to me in that way; he cares only for his work! What has he done to you? And do you think that the White Riders can drive him away? Do you

know this man whom you expect to scare like a partridge out of the Barrens? You don't wish to kill him, do you? Oh—you mean murder!"

"I mean he shall leave the Lake!" cried Ember, exasperated.

"He never will until his year has ended!" said Rose, terribly excited; "and if you attack him he'll fight! Do you want to be killed!—do you want to have others killed! —I tell you I know he will shoot you all down if you raid him again."

"It will be his last shot, then!" roared Ember; "mind your own business, I tell you; I guess I know what I'm about. Go and make that mask; I'll want it to-night!"

She clung to him, pushing the revolver away, flinging belt and cartridges to the floor. She begged him not to do this thing, she pleaded for herself now,—for, in spite of everything, she loved her father,—she offered him the money that would be hers when she came of age, imploring him to

take it, insisting that it was useless to her if he were not with her to enjoy it.

Her terror touched the man; in his own way he was proud of her, too.

"Sark's got the money; I can't touch it," he said; "let go of me, Rose, there's no need worrying about me, for the bullet isn't moulded that is coming my way."

He pushed her back into a chair, not too gently.

"If you want to stop this business, you can," he said.

She stared at him with new terror in her blue eyes. Instinctively she knew what he was going to say, and stretched out her hand to stop him; but he went on without pity:

"Give me your promise never to marry that fellow Sark,—never to go near him again,—never to see him!"

Her pallid face enraged him; he struck the table with his clenched hand and swore that Sark should never have her.

"There's a good man wants you," he snarled; "Murden wants you, and you know it, and—you treat him like a cur!"

Her horrified eyes almost drove him into a frenzy.

"Very well!" he cried. "I guess you're not as much afraid of my getting a bullet through my head as you are afraid Sark will! And, by God! if he doesn't get out of Amber Lake he'll have bullets to burn in hell!"

She crept away to her own chamber, utterly crushed. For a long while she sat there in the darkness, crying silently, until her father called up the stairs, asking for his mask, and cursing when he found she had not made it.

She lighted the lamp. With the light, the numbed, hopeless terror seemed to slip away; she could think, too, even while working on the white bit of cloth, damp with her tears; and, as her needle faltered, then went on again, she set her little teeth and bent

her eyebrows with a resolution to see what stuff these White Riders were made of.

When she had finished her father's mask, she went into the kitchen and cooked his supper. There was not enough for two, but she did not want anything except a cup of tea to strengthen her for the work she had in hand.

While he was eating, she slipped up-stairs again, drew from her bosom the cambric mask that Sark had given her, and examined her own handiwork closely.

Presently she hid it under her pillow, threw back the bed-clothes, selected a linen sheet, and drew it gingerly from the bed. Then she began to cut it, double it, measure and baste it with a rapidity that made her white fingers fly.

Toward midnight a curious sound from the northward brought her to the window. The next moment she extinguished the lamp behind her and, creeping to the window again, leaned her face against the glass.

What she saw was a horseman dismounting at the porch below, and she raised the window a little way and whispered: "Mr. Murden!"

The figure below looked up sharply.

"Get me a horse," she said in a low voice, "and don't tell my father that I want it. Wait! I'm coming down."

She slipped out of the door in the rear, descended the outside steps cautiously, and met Murden at the foot of them.

"What do you want of a horse?" asked Murden, with a stealthy glance of admiration at the exquisite face in the starlight.

"I want to ride; father would never allow me,—besides, I am busy all day and have no time. I am longing for a gallop in the dark—will you take me?"

"I can't," said Murden, inwardly cursing his luck, "I've an engagement to-night. But I'll go to-morrow," he added eagerly.

"No," she said pettishly, "I want to go to-night. Of course I can go alone."

"I can't go," he said, with a bitter glance out into the Barrens; "didn't your father tell you that the White Riders were in the saddle?"

"Then—never mind" she said coquettishly; "I know you would come if you could. When can I have my horse?"

"Don't go to-night," he urged. "I will take you for a starlight gallop to-morrow night."

"No, thank you," she said coldly, and turned to reascend the steps.

"Don't be mad at me," pleaded Murden, stepping heavily forward, — "wait! I'll bring you a horse if you want to ride—I'll get you one to-morrow."

"I want it now!" she said.

"Now? It's midnight!"

"I don't care; I want a gallop! Isn't the Heavy Falls road good?"

"Yes," he said,—"but don't go on the Spook Bridge road—there—there's a hole in the bridge and ruts everywhere. If you

want a gallop, there's a horse in your father's barn there. Wait until the White Riders leave, and then you can have your gallop—only keep away from the Spook Bridge!"

"Whose horse is it?"

"Your father's; he has two."

"Did you give them to him?"

"Yes."

"For this White Rider raid?"

"Yes—but be careful what you say, Miss Ember——"

"Who is the man?"

"Nobody," said Murden eagerly, "that is—we're cleaning the bad men out of Weazeltown. Good-night, Miss Ember—and I shall come to ride with you to-morrow evening." He lingered wistfully, hoping for another flash of coquetry from the silent girl on the stairs above him. But she entered the house without turning again, closing the door softly behind her.

When she had lighted the lamp again she

sat down to her sewing, cheeks bright with colour, fingers flying, needle glittering like tiny white lightning in the lamplight.

She neared the end of her task ; a strange bird began calling persistently through the darkness, and she caught the muffled tramp of hoofs and the stir and movement of many men.

She stood up, both arms full of the white drapery she had been sewing on, listening intently.

Again the strange bird uttered its quaint sweet note. She lowered the lamp-wick, extinguished the flame with a breath, and stole down into the silent, empty house, carrying her pile of linen in both arms, and holding the cambric mask between her little teeth.

Then, at the door there came a tapping, and she flung her disguise upon the floor and went to the porch. It was only a dark-skinned man in velveteens who whined !

" Cross my palm with silver, lady,—cross

my palm in the name of the man you love——"

And she flung him a coin, shuddering, and crept back to her dark room, to bury her head in the pillows and weep till dawn.

CHAPTER VIII

A STUDY IN WHITE

RELATING HOW MR. BATTY FOUND A VISION IN SPOTLESS RAIMENT AND LOST IT, AND HOW SARK PAID FOR SOME EXCEEDINGLY POOR POETRY.

MEANWHILE, earlier in the evening, Sark sat at the head of his dinner table, listening to Lanark's enthusiastic description of the fishing among the Sagamore hills, and attempting to prevent Mr Batty from overeating himself on the potted sanglier.

When Lanark had lighted a large fragrant cigar, he expressed his readiness and ability to confer with Sark on any topic, including business and the theory concerning the transmigration of souls.

"Talk here," said Sark; "I'll put a rod in shape for you while you prattle, if you like."

So Molly cleared the table for action, leaving nothing but a battery of charged glasses and decanters on the polished mahogany, and Sark brought out his reels and flies and leaders, while Mr. Batty, who had been rashly exciting himself with truffles and Burgundy, went into the parlour to play mad battle marches on the piano and troll passionate catches to his own accompaniment, in a voice like the complaint of a newly hatched chicken.

"First," said Lanark, "let me tell you about your railroad."

"No, no, drop that just now. You received my letter of course?"

"I did," said the young lawyer, "and I couldn't make head nor tail of it, except that you are intending to make ducks and drakes of the U. & C. extension scheme——"

"All right; never mind that now; what

I want to know is how we are going to invest these funds I hold in trust."

"Put 'em into the road's bonds of course," said Lanark cheerfully.

"No," said Sark, "I want something gilt-edged, Reggy."

"Well, I like that?" cried Lanark; "don't you call your own railroad gilt-edged?"

"Perhaps; but I won't risk trust funds in it," said Sark coolly, selecting a tapered grassline and winding it carefully on a rubber reel. "Now leave the U. & C. out, and fire ahead!"

"Oh, very well," sniffed Lanark, pulling hard at his cigar, "there's another line we can pursue of course, if you insist." And he leaned back in his chair and ran over several plans for the safe investment of Rose Ember's money.

Sark listened intently, reeling up his line, selecting fly after fly from box and book, and placing half a dozen mist-coloured leaders in the tin leader box.

Certainly Lanark knew his business; and, when Sark interrupted him to say that he would rather lose every dollar he had than a single penny of the funds in trust, the young lawyer nodded and said he understood that perfectly.

At last they came to an understanding on the question; Lanark helped himself to the sherry with a sigh, and leaned over to see what Sark had been doing with the tackle.

"Those flies are too large," he observed, pushing the box toward Sark.

"Nonsense," said Sark, "don't you suppose I know this lake?"

The proximity of the tackle fired Lanark with desire. He picked up a light rod, joined it, swung it gingerly, avoiding the ceiling, and finally attached the reel.

"I'm going to take a cast this evening," he said; "will you come, Jack?"

"I'll paddle you about; I don't care to spend my evening disentangling my line," laughed Sark.

Mr. Batty was still enthusiastically assaulting the piano in the parlor, and Sark called to him: "Oh, shut up that noise and come fishing!"

"He'll tip the boat," suggested Lanark, as Mr. Batty, beaming through his spectacles, came skipping unsteadily at the summons of his superior.

"I'm shocked, Batty," observed Sark; "go and row yourself sober on the lake. Come on, Reggie, I'll pull you about a bit."

Sark's boat-house rose from the water's edge just below the Spook Bridge. He kept a few small boats there, fitted for entomological researches in the lake, and, into one of these, he ushered Lanark. Then he stowed Mr. Batty away in a horrible species of skiff, almost paralyzed with eel-grass, and sadly in need of rowlocks.

It was in vain for Mr. Batty to protest; Sark flung two unsightly oars into the craft, unhooked the painter and shoved Mr. Batty into deep water where he struck out franti-

cally with one oar until the boat spun round and round like a wounded duck.

Meanwhile Lanark waited with loosened line, and presently Sark appeared with a lantern, closing the boat-house door behind him.

They set out silently: Sark paddled; the little night creatures came swarming around the lantern in the stern, flashing like flakes of tinsel in and out of its yellow rays.

"Batty!" called out Sark, "stop that splashing! We're not after porpoises, you know!"

Mr. Batty in his unwieldy craft floated sullenly out into the lake before the breeze, and, presently they heard him attune his innocuous voice to the summer wind, singing of love as he drifted resignedly away.

"He'll sober fast enough when it comes to pulling back again," said Sark; "now, Reggie, fling your tackle to the breeze, open your eyes, shut your mouth, and see what heaven will send you!"

Heaven must have been listening for its cue; a heavy splash, another, and then a swirling flop and a slack line told a heart-breaking tale of lost opportunity.

"Confound it!" muttered Lanark, "he jumped at the flies but I struck too slowly. I'm all in a tangle, Jack."

He reeled in to disengage the line; Sark set the lantern beside him, then settled back comfortably to smoke and stare at the stars that seemed to grow brighter and yellower while he looked.

Mr. Batty's feeble warble had ceased; in the evening silence the slap of tiny waves on bow and stern made mellow music, accented at intervals by the dull splash of a fish surging from dusky depths to spring quivering into the starlight.

Against the pale radiance of the heavens a mass of black foliage detached itself from the invisible shore; tiny lights gleamed in the north where Murden's store and the shanties stood, and a single yellow lantern

hung from the flag-pole of the dark distillery. Shoreward, too, the thin chorus of the night insects came faintly to their ears when the wind set right; sometimes they heard the breeze ruffle the lily-pads, sometimes a water fowl came whistling past to drop into the lake with a whirring spatter.

Lanark, swearing in eloquent whispers, was still picking at the tangled flies as they drifted along a shore where the wild laurel and rhododendron swept the dark water with great clusters of pink and white bloom.

A mink swam across the bows, leaving a shimmering fan-shaped trail in his wake, ever widening until it merged into the tiny wavelets that criss-crossed the breeze-stirred waters.

Sark was contented; he lay back lazily, breathing the deep sweet incense of lake and forest, blinking peacefully at the stars that winked at him with their limpid eyes. He heard the water lap on bow and stern,

he heard the still sounds in the forest, he heard Lanark's quaint anathemas, and the hum of gnats around the lantern.

He was very comfortable; he had just been thinking of Rose Ember, idly, pleasantly, when Lanark said, "Damn," and stood up in the boat.

"I've snipped off two flies," he said vindictively; "I can't manage more than one at night. Shall I cast here, Jack?"

"Go ahead," replied Sark.

For an hour the measured swish of the silk sounded over his head; he smoked and listened, paddling quietly hither and thither, but no trout broke the dark surface of the lake to oblige Lanark, and that young man expressed his weariness in picturesque metaphors.

"Try a luminous fly," said Sark; "I hooked one to your cap."

The evening had grown warmer; one by one the stars went out; the perfume from the forest grass grew sweeter and heavier.

"Rain?" queried Lanark, fumbling with his luminous fly.

"Probably," yawned Sark, "but not before morning."

After a moment he added: "I thought I heard voices out there on the water."

"You did," said Lanark; "I think I can make out two boats."

As he spoke, a voice broke out into soft, soulful melody, accompanied by the tinkle of a wire-stringed banjo.

"It's Batty," said Sark.

In point of fact it was Mr. Batty. Highly spiced food and Burgundy unwisely sipped had sent him out upon the lake a changed Batty—a rash, impetuous, yearning Batty. And, as he drifted he found himself side on to another craft in the darkness,—a dainty little row-boat in which sat a young lady in white, regarding him with deep concern.

"At first," she said, "I thought you meant to sink me."

"Dear me!" cried Mr. Batty; "I am

very, very sorry—it was the truffles—I mean the oar-locks—and I beg your pardon very sincerely."

But as the boats still clung obstinately together, and as the girl made no effort to pull away from the weed-clogged craft, they spun around in circles until Mr. Batty was tired.

"You are not much of an oar, are you?" asked the girl.

"I can never regret my lack of skill under such conditions," replied Mr. Batty in a spasm of gallantry.

If the girl had not been very young and very lonely, what actually did happen would not have occurred. However, it did occur; she let her boat drift where it listed, quite resigned, for she had not seen a man in many months—that is a man of moderate years; and so, as far as she was concerned, the boats could drift to where the water-lilies twined.

"Oh, play upon that banjoline!" pleaded Mr. Batty, clasping both hands, after they

had floated about in silence for ten throbbing minutes.

The abruptness of the prayer for harmony was softened by Mr. Batty's modulated attitude and his imploring voice. Besides, he had the good taste to refer to the instrument as a "banjoline"—an inspiration of the moment, replete with poetry. Now Miss Alida Guernsey had never heard a plain nigger banjo apostrophised so delicately. She looked not unkindly upon Mr. Batty and touched the instrument with a small tentative thumb.

"I never could," she said.

"Do—oh do!" whispered Mr. Batty, "and I will sing."

But still she coyly refused, and the boats, interlocked, drifted before an idle and mischievous wind into the darkness sweet with wild wood fragrance and troubled by the paling glimmer of star-lit waters.

"My goodness!" said Miss Guernsey, "what was that splash?"

"Only a duck," said Mr. Batty tenderly; "only a little wild duck. I had some for dinner, intensely truffled."

No, he was not a normal Batty: paté and Burgundy had undone him; he had sold his shyness for a mess of truffles.

After the starlight had its effect, and their tongues found speech sweeter than silence, they told each other their names and residences.

"I have no parents," observed Miss Guernsey, clasping her knee with both hands. "I live with my uncle, Mr. Guernsey, in the summer, and with my maiden aunt, Miss Gumble, in winter. Why do you and Mr. Sark never come to our house?"

"I would have if I had known you were there," replied that rash and burning paraphrase on the real Mr. Batty.

"There is to be a house party at my uncle's and one at Mr. Creed's; lots of people are coming; we are to have dances

and picnics and Venetian water-fêtes and very jolly times. Do you know why?"

"No, I don't," replied Mr. Batty, enviously.

"Well, it is to celebrate a great financial deal and a great deal of fiançailles—it's horrid to make such a pun—and I don't feel much like it either."

"Whose fiançailles?" inquired Mr. Batty, much disturbed.

"Oh, mine and Samuel Creed's—old Mr. Joshua's son," she replied, as though speaking of an event connected with people whom she knew only by name.

"Yours!" bleated Mr. Batty.

"Yes; I don't care."

"Oh, but I do!" protested that infatuated victim of starlight and Burgundy; "I care—I care most—most atrociously, most poignantly!"

"Why?" asked this very youthful maid, picking her banjo strings pensively.

"I cannot put it in words," said Mr.

Batty earnestly, "but I can make you feel a wild, subtle, nameless meaning in my songs. Oh, Miss Guernsey, do you, *do* you play, 'Primrose Promises'? If you do, play it and let me sing it to the stars and—to you!"

And so it came about that Reginald Lanark, reeling in his dripping line, turned around as Sark spoke, and observed two boats drifting, side on, across their bows.

"It's Batty," repeated Sark, "with a girl and a banjo! Where in the name of all miracles he found that combination on Amber Lake at midnight is more than I can guess."

Lanark, who had an offer at his luminous fly, only grunted a reply, but when, a moment later, he raised the fish for the second time and missed it, because Mr. Batty's weedy scow came sailing over the spot where the trout lay, he raised his voice in anguish:

"'Ware boat!" he cried; "don't blank us for heaven's sake! I've been at this for hours and just missed my second rise!"

Mr. Batty's twin goggles glittered with a baleful basilisk glow in the lantern light; Miss Guernsey looked up in confusion to meet the puzzled eyes of Sark.

"I had no idea that Mr. Batty and I were drifting near anybody," she said truthfully. "Won't you please excuse us for spoiling your fishing?"

Her skilful assumption of a previous acquaintanceship with Mr. Batty showed her to be a girl of resource. But, for that matter, all girls are, under similar circumstances. It is only man who becomes an abject, hesitating, stammering idiot.

Lanark and Sark took off their caps; there was a pause during which they and Miss Guernsey looked hard at Mr. Batty. However, he had sufficient presence of mind to present the two men in decent form, but added: "I didn't see your lantern; if I had I'd have sheered off."

The loss of every trout in the lake is sufficiently recompensed by this unlooked-

for honour," said Sark, a trifle maliciously. Lanark also said something civil about offering his rod to Miss Guernsey.

"But—you would have to show me how," she said diffidently.

"That would be very easy," replied Lanark, "if I was sure your boat would hold two—and you cared to have me teach you—"

"It was built for two," said Miss Guernsey innocently.

A hollow sound burst from Mr. Batty as Lanark dexterously transferred himself from Sark's boat into the frail row-boat, but the splash of the rocking boats softened it to a sigh, which tribute was not lost on the fickle maid in white muslin.

"You must stay close to us and sing, Mr. Batty," she said graciously, but that blighted gentleman haughtily unhooked his painter, splashed around in a circle for a while, and finally melted away shoreward. After a few moments his voice was heard in song, far

away in the night, mournful, dramatic, and inexpressibly soulful. It was the Swan-Song of Lionel Batty.

"I was afraid that—perhaps—Mr. Batty might feel deserted," ventured Miss Guernsey.

But Lanark was too busy teaching her to cast, to think about anything else.

"You hold your hand so," he said.

"So?"

"Yes—it's so dark I can't teach you very well. Where is your hand?"

"Here. Can't you feel it?"

"Yes—now I can."

Sark, drifting out into the lake, lighted another cigar and listened to the murmur of their voices. He had known little Miss Guernsey by sight; he had seen her paddling about the lake in her lonely little boat, and had often felt sorry for her.

"But," he reflected, "I didn't know Batty and she were on such pleasant terms. You can always trust those rosy-faced, bald, be-

spectacled young men for knowing every petticoat in their precinct."

By the dim glow of his cigar he consulted his watch. It was past midnight, and he was tired, and—anyway that little Guernsey girl ought not to be floating about in the dark at that hour. So he went back to make himself unpopular by announcing the hour with dreary, uncompromising directness.

She would not allow them to accompany her back to the dock across the lake, bidding them depart very prettily; and presently she disappeared, pulling gracefully into the darkness, now unlighted by a single star.

"What a pretty little thing!" said Lanark, settling himself in the stern.

"You couldn't see her," observed Sark drily.

"No, but her voice—and such a soft little hand—I was showing her how to cast," he added hastily.

"Quite so," replied Sark; "and you can paddle a bit now if you like."

"Not I," replied Lanark promptly; "develop your muscles, Jack, and let me develop my theory."

"What theory?" snapped Sark, picking up the oars and sending the skiff shooting through the darkness.

"Oh, a theory of mine concerning things," replied Lanark vaguely, and relapsed into silence. He was thinking of Alida Guernsey and applying to her a theory of his which had held true for many years. It was the theory of the uselessness of women in the world, but somehow or other it did not seem applicable to the little maid in white muslin.

"A study in white," he said aloud,—"a perfect study in innocence and white."

"What?" asked Sark, backing water and swinging broadside on to the boat-house landing.

The next moment he bent forward, blew out the lantern, flung his cigar into the water and seized Lanark by the arm. "Quiet,

Reggie," he whispered; "drop your cigar into the lake, quick!"

"What the devil is the matter?" whispered Lanark in reply, doing as he was bidden.

"White-caps! I ought to have told you —I ought to have stayed at home—hark!"

The low sweet call of a strange night bird broke out in the darkness; a second call answered it from the dim hillside. Something was moving up there; there came the soft trample of horses on the sod, a clink of a horse-shoe striking a pebble, then sudden silence.

"There's somebody moving in the boat-house," whispered Lanark.

There was; Mr. Batty, on all fours, but now painfully sober, came creeping along the platform toward them.

"Launch a boat for Heaven's sake," he gasped; "the house and road are full of masked horsemen. They turned me out,—they turned Molly and the cook out with

me, and they are searching for you with shot-guns!"

"Is that Molly and Sarah in the boat-house?" asked Sark under his breath. "Wait! Tell them to get into this boat. And, Reggie, you take care of them; I'm going to see what this business really means."

He sprang silently to the little string-piece, traversed the wharf, and laid his hand on Molly's plump arm.

"Get into the boat," he said; "you're not afraid, are you, Molly?"

"Not very," replied Molly, with quivering lips, "but I don't like to see a thing in a white sheet looking through the kitchen window."

Most people would probably agree with Molly, and Sark himself felt an unpleasant sensation filtering through his anger.

He guided Molly and Sarah to the boat, handed them safely and noiselessly in, then leaned down to whisper to Lanark:

"Paddle outside of a bulls-eye's range and lie quietly on your oars. They won't wait for daylight anyway, and I must get a glimpse of them."

"Won't you let me go with you, Jack?" urged Lanark.

"No—I want to do some wriggling in Indian fashion—and you don't know how. Ready? Off you go! Don't splash!"

The boat backed silently out into the darkness, and Sark turned and mounted the path that led through the bushes to the highway.

There was little light; the stars had entirely disappeared. He crept cautiously to the edge of the fringing alders, then dropped into the damp grass and wormed his way to the edge of the road.

On the Spook Bridge stood a horseman, draped in white.

For ten minutes Sark watched the motionless, spectral figure, then, flattening himself out like a grass snake, he worked his way

up the road in the shadow of the alders until he came to the dry culvert that crossed the highway at the foot of his own garden. Into this he wriggled, then, crouching low, glided stealthily under the shelter of his own hedge and along the edge of the lawn toward a group of horsemen that waited before the open door of his own house.

Even had it been light he could not have recognised either horses or riders, for man and beast were clothed and swathed in white.

As he lay there watching them, three tall figures, hideous in their masks and shrouds, issued from the house and hastily mounted at the porch. Then the sweet bird note broke out close beside him with startling clearness, the sheeted horsemen wheeled, gathered, then drove by him at a gallop, sending the gravel in a stinging shower into his face.

Fainter and fainter grew the dull stampede in the distance; now it was gone—now he

heard it again—now the whispering night breeze drowned the last soft echoes.

He rose and walked soberly to his house. The light from a lamp streamed out upon the lawn, but the house was silent and deserted,—deserted save for a gruesome thing that sat upright on the stairs, just below the first landing—the straw-stuffed effigy of a man with a bit of rope around his neck, and on his breast a paper pinned:

"This here is the second warning so git before the third warning is stuck onto your white liver with a nife.

"Capting, White Riders.

"K. O. T. B."

After Sark had tossed the sprawling effigy into the wood-house he went upstairs, pocketed a revolver, lighted a pipe, and came down again, curiously exhilarated, to go in search of his small household, now afloat in a chilly boat on Amber Lake.

As he crossed the Spook Bridge, a ragged creature in velveteens, whined at him from the roadside: "Cross my palm, Romi,—cross my palm with silver in the name of her you love!"

"What's the matter, are you sick?" asked Sark. Then he came nearer and peered into the man's face: "Oh, you're a gipsy, eh? Will a bit of silver loosen your tongue concerning some very recent visitors of mine?"

The gipsy's lean hand closed over the coin; he stood up in the dusk and raised his ragged arm:

"Romi, you laugh at the Romany patter, but nevertheless signs are read, and signs shall be rhymed to the last day's dawning—"

And he broke into a doggerel sing-song—

"They who gallop in robe and mask,
Ask of the devil a devil's task,
Never the unborn moon shall see
Sign of the white-robed company!

"Yet shall a rider ride hard with death,
To save thy soul and thy body's breath,

And the hunted shall hunt, for death and life,
And a mask and gown shall shroud a wife !

" Read thy riddle ere day's begun,
One can answer, and only one !
Love of a rider in white thou'll't ask,
And meet thy bride in a Cambric Mask ! "

" Thanks very much," said Sark, suspiciously, wondering where the fellow had heard of the mask he had found. But he turned away and walked on through the bushes to the landing.

CHAPTER IX

A STUDY IN PINK

IN WHICH JOHN SARK AND ROSE EMBER STROLL THROUGH A CHAPTER AND RETURN TO FIND AN OPEN DOOR ON THE LAST PAGE.

THE remainder of the week passed peacefully enough; Sark rubbed up his three shot-guns and stood them in the rack at the foot of his bed; he even sat up late for two nights, testing the catches on the heavy wooden shutters, prowling about the lawn and laurel hedge; but nothing came to disturb house or occupants except a small owl that managed to fall down Mr. Batty's chimney with a screech that raised the house and loosened most of the remaining hairs on Mr. Batty's intellectual head.

As for Lanark he found the fishing better by day than by night, yet, strange to say, he never missed a single evening on the lake; but whether it was to fish or to meditate nobody inquired.

Molly Trig and black Sarah the cook behaved admirably after the startling apparition of the White Riders. Sark told them quite plainly that he meant to fight if the masked marauders disturbed him again, but they refused to leave his service with such sturdy loyalty that he felt it incumbent on him to raise their wages on the spot.

Rose Ember had arrived the morning after the White Riders' raid, to find Sark calmly feeding violet leaves to the few remaining Nitocris caterpillars which the bandit bird had spared him.

He looked up at her inquiringly, for she had not come to breakfast with them all as usual, and he thought she appeared pale and troubled.

"You are not well," he said; "you can-

not stand the close application to study that I can. Don't feel it necessary to stay with me if you need the fresh air outside."

A glow spread slowly over neck and face; she did not answer but turned to the long rows of bell-glasses and mechanically began to lift each and examine the plant enclosed.

"My lawyer is here," said Sark; "I think we have arranged for the investment of the funds. Mr. Lanark is out on the lake fishing, but he will explain to you at luncheon what we propose to do."

"I don't care to know," murmured Rose; "I have absolute confidence in you."

The remark was commonplace enough, and it was strange that it should have sent a distinct thrill through Sark.

She glanced up to meet his eyes, then lowered her head and carefully lifted a bell-glass under which several spine-covered larvæ of Junonia cœnia were endeavouring to annihilate a helpless and tender bunch of narrow-leaved plantains.

"You ought to know what your own lawyer is doing," said Sark, not knowing what else to say.

"I thought nobody ever knew what any lawyer was doing," said Rose.

"Oh, Lanark isn't that kind of lawyer," said Sark, laughing. "Besides you are sure to like him,—he's one of those clean-cut, well-put-up, amiable fellows that everybody likes at first glance."

Sark might have been describing himself, so perfectly did his description of Lanark suit him; and Rose glanced again through the great bell-glass at this pleasant-eyed young man who stood twirling his silver forceps and frowning slightly in the dazzling yellow sunlight.

"You will certainly fall in love with him," he said. Now Sark had not meant to say that; he didn't know why he had said it, and the emptiness of the remark amazed and annoyed him. Besides, he had never been on any footing with Miss Ember that

admitted of gallantry or even the most delicate badinage.

From that moment, however, their relations certainly underwent some subtle change, but whether through the chemistry of that vapid observation, or through the alchemy of Miss Ember's reply, cannot be successfully argued here.

What Miss Ember said was this: "Do you believe I could so easily fall in love with anybody, Mr. Sark?"

So she was not offended at his presumptuous banter after all!

"Are you immune?" asked Sark.

"Are you?" she replied in the manner of women; and met his embarrassment with a daring little smile.

He had been immune from love all his life; he knew it and found in it a reason for pride. But pride is vanity and runs gaily among pitfalls, and a net is spread at noonday for the young who mock at love.

"If I ever love a woman I fancy I shall

know it," he said, abjectly begging the question ; at which Miss Ember smiled recklessly into his serious eyes and lifted another bell-glass.

"There are," she said, "five caterpillars of the Astyanax feeding on this huckleberry shrub, and they've eaten half the leaves. I shall get my little trowel and dig up another on the Barrens."

She tied a clean pink apron around her waist, took down a pink flowered sunbonnet from a peg, and gravely put it on.

Possibly the rosy goddess on Olympus wears a pink sunbonnet. But if she does not, the goddess Aphrodite has much to learn.

Before Rose Ember sallied forth to procure pabulum for the young and hungry Astyanax family, she did a thing that was not right,—nay it was downright and delicately devilish ;—she rolled up both sleeves to the shoulder.

If she of Milo had arms,—but she hasn't, —and it is also quite impossible to describe

Rose Ember's arms—those creamy exquisite rounded arms that seemed to exhale a fresh fragrance in the heavy air of the greenhouse.

"I will go with you," said Sark.

"I shall be only a moment—and you have so much to do——"

"No I, haven't," he muttered guiltily; and they passed out of the greenhouse, side by side.

It had rained that morning before daylight, and the sun had not yet dried the beaded drops on brake and fern and blueberry patch. And, as Rose walked, she held her skirts with a dainty discretion that kept them dry, and that neither revealed nor entirely concealed two distracting little buckled shoes.

The demoralisation of man is an instructive spectacle, yet not always necessary to inculcate prudence into readers of romance; and there is a certain pathos, too, in the disintegration of a healthy self-sufficiency, which need not be mercilessly dissected for the edification of a receptive public.

When Rose knelt down before a small but ambitious young huckleberry bush, Sark knelt too; when Rose cautiously loosened the earth in a circle around the woody stem, Sark patiently removed it by handfuls; and when Rose triumphantly drew the shrub from mother earth, Sark carefully wiped her rosy fingers with his pocket handkerchief.

The labour had not been arduous, yet Rose breathed a sigh like one who contemplates the achievement of an Augean project. She was young and vigorous and her lungs were delightfully healthy;—so was the sigh.

"Are you tired?" asked Sark, tenderly, of this young embodiment of health.

"How perfectly absurd!" she said, but her voice was very sweet.

Unconsciously they began to wander on together, side by side, through the dewy moorland where the fragile wild roses showered their knees with silken petals, and silvery wind-flowers marked a thousand pathways

for them toward the rising sun; where the shadow of the speckled duck-hawk swept the scrubby slopes, and startled plover sheered skyward, wheeling, darting in hysterical flight, higher, higher, until they melted into the blinding blue.

Silence is never absolute; stillness is comparative; it is melodious sometimes, sometimes fragrant.

The silence of this fresh wild moorland was sweeter for the carolling of finches, deeper for the cackle of the purple grackle stalking with burnished plumage through the fern, musical when the bright-eyed musk-rat splashed in his reedy pool.

Across their aimless path a sleek pine martin, red as a fox, stole cautiously, only to mount a lonely silver poplar, and bound and thrash among the slender bending branches. Once they started a hen-partridge, and the moss swarmed for a moment with scurrying chicks. Then the old bird, trailing the deceitful wing, charged straight

at Rose with such a bristle of plumage and such evil eyes, that the young incarnation of the goddess dropped her skirts and took Sark's arm between both hands.

"I can never get used to that," she said, in extenuation of her half panic.

Sark did not answer; he seemed still to feel that soft pressure on his arm.

"We must not wander too far," she said, presently, looking back.

Already the lake had disappeared behind the low hillocks; around them on every side stretched the Barrens, streaked in the west by the dark fringes of an unknown wilderness.

"Let us sit down," he said.

"But your work?"

"I don't care," he said, resentfully. Why did she persist in sending him back into an atmosphere of antiseptic solutions and stuffy hot-house odours?

"Besides," she said, "the sun has ruined the roots of my little huckleberry bush."

"Very well," he said, exasperated, "then we'll go back if you insist."

But she had already sat down.

"The little Astyanax children will be hungry," she observed, looking at him from the depths of her pink sun-bonnet, with a curious sense of satisfaction.

The Astyanax caterpillars were the first ever raised in captivity by any entomologist and had been to Sark as the apple of his eye.

"I dare say they'll stand it until luncheon," he replied carelessly; but still the merciless maid goaded him.

"You left the greenhouse door open; perhaps that bird thief may come in again——"

"Heavens!" he said, "can't I take ten minutes, rest from those accursed caterpillars without reproach!"

"Of course," she said meekly; "I only thought you cared more about your caterpillars than you did for—for——"

She did not finish ; it was quite needless. The colour under his sunburn deepened, and, man-like, he fidgeted silently.

A family of small weasels, who rented a a pile of rocks, near by, from a hoary old woodchuck and three black snakes, began to show off before Rose, turning, twisting, gliding, chasing each other in and out of cleft and hollow like sleek brown and white lizards. Presently, however, their landlord, the rusty old woodchuck, came out to sit on his haunches and contemplate that fatal shadow of his which had kept him underground through a perfectly normal springtide.

" He's reflecting on wasted time and foolish proverbs," said Rose. " Put not your faith in prophets, Mr. Sark." She drew a cambric handkerchief from her belt and touched her flushed face.

" What an ominous voice in the wilderness ! " said Sark, laughing. " But I don't put my faith in prophets, or in prophecies

of disaster either. Suppose I tell you what happened last night."

"Suppose you do," said Rose faintly. She had suddenly grown very pale, but her face was shadowed by the pink sunbonnet.

So he told her about the White Riders, of their menacing placard, of the effigy. He did not affect to laugh or speak too lightly; he told her that he meant trouble, that he would not tolerate that sort of thing, and that he had three shot-guns of 10-, 12-, and 16-bore, to welcome ceremoniously the White Riders on their next informal visit.

She listened, head downcast, idle fingers tearing the purple petals from a late violet. She was so silent that he began to feel ashamed of his confidence; he thought that, after all, the whole affair might be little more than a rough ill-natured practical joke, and that she probably considered his serious preparation unwarranted, if not slightly suggestive of timidity.

"It may be a joke," he said almost sulkily, "and I may be a fool to notice it, but in the west we never hesitate to get the drop on people who wear masks. By the way, didn't I give you that cambric mask I found under the laurel hedge?"

"Yes," said the girl in a low voice, playing nervously with her handkerchief.

"I wish you would bring it to me when you think of it," he said; "there was more or less of a clue in that bit of cloth."

"What clue?" she asked, turning quickly.

"Why the thing was made from a woman's handkerchief—like yours, there; and besides, the pasteboard backing came from one of those cardboard boxes that my antiseptic cotton is always packed in."

The girl sat perfectly still; even her breathing seemed to cease. Sark was looking at the handkerchief in her lap, curiously, and presently he asked her for it. Perhaps she did not understand, perhaps she was too

frightened to move. She suffered him to take the handkerchief from her unresisting fingers, and he examined it, and raised it to his face.

"Now isn't that strange," he said; "this handkerchief appears to be the mate to the one on the mask, and, by Jove, it's faintly scented with the same odour. You didn't take it from the mask, did you, Miss Ember?"

She did not answer; he repeated the question, bending down to see her face, but she covered her eyes with both hands and leaned both elbows on her knees.

"For Heaven's sake," cried Sark, alarmed, "don't be distressed about a thing like that! I didn't care anything about that mask, and you were perfectly welcome to pull it to pieces!"

But Rose was not to be consoled so easily; the reaction unnerved her for a moment, and she wept with a quiet but healthy abandon that drove Sark nearly frantic. Under that

influence he said some very pleading and tender things that sounded natural enough under the circumstances, but which, on thinking of them later, made him blush, all to himself, in his own room. Rose, too, remembered the things he said, and her fair face burned deliciously.

But at that moment, seated there in the solitude of the Barrens, she felt that fate was playing tricks on her which she could not and would not endure, and she intended to inform her father to that effect.

They walked back very soberly together. Sark uprooted another huckleberry shrub for his Nitocris brood, and Rose dug out another, penitently.

"It is very pleasant to walk with you," said Sark, as they turned away toward the lake, now visible again across the moors.

"I have found it pleasant, too," said Rose, tremulously.

"It must not be our last walk together," said Sark, coming nearer.

"N-o," said Rose, with the ghost of a sigh.

"You are tired!" exclaimed Sark, knowing she was not, but seizing the opportunity to express sympathy and concern. This stock remark of lovers appears to lose none of its perennial freshness. It means, to-day, as much to youth and maid as when first propounded in sweet-scented Eden.

"No," said Rose, gratefully, "I am not one bit tired."

Sark, highly satisfied with himself and all the world, insisted on solicitude for the alleged fatigue of this big, healthy, glowing maid; and, curiously enough, she did not find his anxiety as ridiculous as she might have had he not been John Sark.

So they strolled over the spongy reindeer moss and bedded brake, giving a wide berth to the cranberry bog that quaked afar as they skirted it. The grey snipe scattered into flight as they passed, and faded from eyesight long before their petulant thin piping died out in the sky.

As they ascended the last incline, a man suddenly appeared on the crest, walking with heavy swinging strides across the stubble. It was Murden, and his square dark face grew sullen as he saw them; but he greeted them both fairly enough, and took his pipe from his mouth in passing.

"I suppose you've heard all about my ghostly guests last night," said Sark amiably, returning his salute.

"Ay," replied Murden, halting.

"Probably a joke," said Sark, "don't you think so?"

"No, I don't," replied Murden, briefly.

Sark hesitated, glancing keenly into the heavy countenance that met his squarely:

"You think it means trouble?"

"The White Riders play rough jokes, I hear," said Murden.

"Who are the White Riders?"

"Ay—who are they and who are they?" repeated Murden. "You'll have to join

them to find out, I guess," he added, shrugging his broad shoulders.

"Murden," said Sark, "do you suppose anything on earth can drive me out of a place I choose to stay in?"

"Do you take me for a White Rider?" sneered Murden. "What do I care where you stay?"

"You misunderstand me," said Sark; "I only put it to you, as an independent man, that it will take more than a dozen bed sheets and pocket handerchiefs with holes cut in them to frighten me out of this county. I think it's a rough practical joke, but if you don't agree with me, I wish you'd come up to the house to-night and talk it over."

"I can't," said Murden, with sarcastic politeness, "I have an appointment to ride with Miss Ember this evening."

He turned on his heel and struck out into the Barrens, and Sark walked on beside Rose, biting his lip.

Neither spoke until they reach the green-

house. Then Rose said suddenly: "I never had the faintest idea of riding with anybody this evening."

"I supposed not," replied Sark coldly.

This hurt Rose, because she was still very, very young. And anyway, it was none of Sark's business with whom she rode. She hated herself for the explanation; it humiliated her. She marched up to the greenhouse and entered the open door. Then she reappeared, haughty, but still condescending to do her duty.

"Mr. Sark," she said in chilling tones, "there's a bird in your greenhouse, and ten caterpillars of Colias Philodice are missing."

CHAPTER X

THE ULTIMATUM OF ROSE

A DIGRESSION, A RETROGRESSION, AND A LITTLE PROGRESSION

THE end of the week was quite as peaceful as the beginning. No horsemen draped in white came to trouble the midnight silence in Sark's vicinity; Lanark fished placidly all day, and pretended to fish most of the night. However, the twang of the banjo coming fitfully on the evening breeze from the lake told a very different story; moreover, he never brought back any trout in the evenings.

Mr. Batty avoided highly spiced food and drank a thin sour claret to subdue the flesh and the devil, bidding fair to drown the latter with his deep and earnest draughts.

He was therefore able to devote his time to a microscopic analysis of the second pair of legs belonging to an undetermined variety of that misleading and dimorphic butterfly, Papilio Turnus. There probably is nothing on earth as soothing and as moral as a study of dimorphism. Let the repentant *viveur* give up the gaiety of sackcloth and ashes and sit down to ponder upon melanism, albinism, and why the Disippus, which birds find palatable, mimics the Plexippus, which gives birds the stomach-ache.

Sark wandered around among his hot-houses, doing little and thinking less. A lazy pleasure in living had taken the place of his feverish application to microscope and cabinet; he lounged in the sunshine, watching Rose busy with the great bell-jars; and the golden moments fled like sands of gold pouring in a crystal time-glass.

Rose appeared to be tranquil and contented with the new *modus vivandi* which permitted her to meet Sark's serious moods

with pretty raillery, or his bantering moods with a delicate coquetry that was more than enough to demoralise the whole calendar of saints.

Across the lake, at the great wooden mansions of Joshua Creed and Daniel Guernsey, house parties had already begun. What sort of people they might be, Sark could only conjecture, for all he saw of them was the carriage loads that passed his house from the station at the water-tower. Lanark said that they were a lot of rich vulgarians without shame or grandfathers, whose children's children stood an excellent chance to lead New York society some day.

But this was merely an Englishman's acrid sneer, of course, because everybody knows New York society is a harmonious symphony of wit, birth, culture, and Olympian exclusiveness, to be compared only to that brilliant and delicate *ensemble* which composes the society of Washington, D. C.

So the week ended peacefully, and the banjo of Miss Alida Guernsey played it out with a bucolic simplicity that presaged peace, good will, and a general lying down of lions and lambs.

But this sort of thing couldn't last. On Monday Sark found a third placard stuck on his door with a bowie knife, a paper filled with coarse insults and threats. On Tuesday six of his cattle were missing from their pasture on the Barrens ; and, on Wednesday night, one of his distant barns was burned to the ground.

He had a long talk with Lanark over the situation, but they decided not to notify the sheriff of Mohawk County at present. However, before the week ended, that official had all he could attend to ; for disorder had become rampant in the county, the village journals were full of White-cap outrages and lawless raids. A man named Jim McMurray, living near Weazeltown, was whipped by a band of White Riders because

he expressed his opinion about them too freely. In the outskirts of Heavy Falls a wretched negro was tarred and feathered because he boasted that he could point out a dozen White-caps on the main street of the town any day in the week except Sunday, when they were all at church.

The news of the burning of Sark's barn excited the whole county. The various unions and brotherhoods of workingmen were charged with knowing too much about the White-caps and White Riders; they replied through the daily papers, repudiating the charge.

In the lawless quarry districts near Weazeltown, where disputes sometimes ended in shooting affrays, terror reigned; men no longer took sides in plain outspoken comments, condemning or sympathising with Whitecaps and White Riders. Few among them, however, were sorry to see rich men harried. Rumours of Sark's immense wealth began to circulate to his prejudice, and no-

body took the trouble to inquire why he had become obnoxious to the White Riders.

On Friday evening, near the Weazeltown quarries, the sheriff made a vigorous and ungrammatical address in favour of law and order, and was howled down openly by the denizens of that delightful hamlet. Neither sheriff nor game-wardens had ever been very popular in the neighbourhood.

It is the single match that sets the forest on fire; a spark of disorder finds plenty of tinder everywhere in this pleasant planet. So, from the first symptoms of lawlessness in the Amber Lake country, a general restlessness spread throughout the region. Why Sark had been persecuted only Murden and Ember knew; even Dagberg was in the dark, and he only followed his leaders because he understood that there was money to be divided when Sark was run out of the country, although how and where that money was to be obtained he had not the faintest idea. As for the remainder of the White

Rider band, now revived after years of quiescence since the long quarry strikes of 1890 had ended, they were in the saddle again partly for the excitement, partly to right some imaginary wrong done to Ember and Murden by Sark, partly because they were not unwilling to have mischief done to a rich man.

But the rumour and then the certainty that the White Riders were abroad again acted like magic on the rest of the county. Remnants of old bands, organised during the long strike, drifted together and reorganised from sheer force of example. There were plenty of old scores to be wiped out, plenty of fancied abuses to rectify. And these abuses, personal or political, were easily regulated by terrorism—more easily than by appeals to justice or process of law.

Truly the spark of anarchy burns eternally in the breasts of the freest of people.

Who and what were the White Riders? Nobody seemed to know. As for Sark, if he

suspected anybody, he held his peace and attended to his own affairs with misleading earnestness. Lanark in particular did not think he appreciated the gravity of the situation, and sent to New York for a magazine rifle which he had formerly used to assassinate deer in Maine.

Possibly Sark did not appreciate the actual danger in the situation. He was a boy when the Ku-Klux rode through the south, he was too young also to remember the Molly Maguires. During his service with the cavalry in the west, he grew accustomed to the western view of the east as an effete conglomeration of tenderfeet, capitalists and fops, and the idea of the law-ridden state of New York furnishing material for bandits and desperadoes made him smile.

No, it is quite certain that he did not appreciate the situation. But the possibility of outrage and lawless injustice had aroused the obstinate in him; his blood tingled, not unpleasantly, at the vague prospect of a

fight; he sat for a whole afternoon twisting his crisp moustache and studying the various placards that had been nailed on his front door, striving for a possible clue to the writer.

The figures in the designs interested him particularly; he studied the drawings of the animals and insects minutely, racking his brains to think of any man he had ever heard of near Amber Lake who might have been the designer.

On Saturday, less inclined for work than ever, he took his butterfly net and collecting-box and strolled out to the hill beyond his house, where Rose was kneeling, digging up plantains for some capricious caterpillars in the greenhouse.

"How you do love to dig little holes, don't you?" he said, with a bantering smile. "I thought you were past the mud-pie age."

She sat up on the grass, flushed and breathless, pushing back her sunbonnet with her wrist.

"A gallant man would dig his own plantains," she said, sticking her trowel deep into the sod.

"Do you think I am ungallant?"

"I think nothing about you."

This always discourages a man, even when he knows the remark to be untrue. He glanced at her plaintively and swung his butterfly net after a grasshopper which went clicking away in gauzy flight.

"I, on the contrary, think a great deal—about you," he said.

"Thank you," she murmured, with an adorably insolent upward glance.

"Why do you make me feel so silly?" he said sharply.

At that she laughed outright and tossed the trowel into the air. It alighted on its blade and stuck quivering in the grass.

"You can't help feeling silly of course,—all men realise their shortcomings at times," she said.

He pretended to be absorbed in the land-

scape, and puffed his cigar with an affected and far-away expression that delighted her.

"I am very busy," she said, "you must not stay here to interrupt me." Her shoe-buckle needed tightening; she adjusted it with an innocent unconsciousness that fascinated him.

"Is it true," he asked, "that old Guernsey has invited you to attend his so-called Venetian fête on the lake?"

"It is quite true," she replied calmly; "who told you?"

"Lanark said you had been invited."

"How did Mr. Lanark know?"

Sark shrewdly suspected that Alida Guernsey had told Mr. Lanark during one of their nocturnal voyages, but he only said: "Lanark is invited too. Are you going?"

"No," said Rose scornfully.

"It will be very gorgeous, they say," continued Sark; "they are going to have a company of light opera singers up from New York to give an entertainment on an illumi-

nated float; then there will be music and fireworks and dancing, and everything a pretty girl could wish."

But Rose looked up at him very seriously: "They are ignorant and unpleasant people," she said; "they have made themselves offensive to me. Why do you suggest my going? Do you think I could find pleasure among such folk?"

A pink spot of anger appeared in each cheek; she drove the trowel deep into the grass and rested her white hand on the handle.

"That creature, Guernsey, after he had flung an insult at my father, came and asked me to marry him! That other one, Joshua Creed, came an hour later for the same purpose! Is it not shameful?"

Sark listened in an amazement that left no room for anger.

"You don't mean old Joshua Creed—and that great red-faced creature Guernsey!" he repeated, unable to credit his senses.

"Yes, I do! Do you know why they came? For my money! Yes—I knew it as soon as they spoke. Think of it! And that miserable old man, Joshua Creed, whined and begged that if I would not marry him I would permit his unspeakable son to pay his addresses to me—that mean-eyed young yokel who was to marry old Guernsey's pretty niece—poor little thing!"

"Samuel Creed?" said Sark incredulously.

"Yes, Samuel Creed. And his father actually flung decency to the winds and begged me not to throw away a fortune, when I could unite it with his, or with Samuel's when he was dead!"

"Have these people come more than once?" asked Sark slowly.

"More than once!" she repeated with a little laugh; "they come every evening; they drive me to my room!"

"Does your father permit this?" said Sark with tightening lips.

She was silent. Who but she should know how little the word "father" meant to her, how little it signified protection.

Ember had been offered a heavy bribe by Guernsey, and a lighter one by Creed, to use his influence with Rose. And the wretched man, already mistrusting Murden, already despairing of routing Sark out of the country, was playing both Murden and his daughter false for the sake of the money offered by Guernsey. He was playing a treacherous and complicated game; he had many irons in the fire; and if Murden failed to win Rose, there were Creed and Guernsey with a promise of money and an offer of permanent shelter for this weak dabbler in crime. But in any case Sark was to be eliminated, for Sark stood between Rose and any offer from Creed, or Guernsey, or Murden. Therefore he rode with the White Riders also, ready for anything short of murder—and perhaps nearly ready for that too.

Rose knew this; she knew also that when Murden had come the night she refused to ride with him, he came to woo her also,—and, the worst of it was that though he came for her money, he would also have come if she had not possessed one penny in the world.

With the others it was easy to deal; with Murden it was hard indeed, for the fury of the man, when she refused him, had been succeeded by a smiling tranquillity which masks the face of certain natures bent on murder. She had told Sark to beware of this man; but that was all she could say without betraying her father's connection with the White Riders.

So she told Sark of Murden's suit, and of her refusal, and she said she feared Murden, not for herself but for others. And Sark understood.

"Miss Ember," said Sark, at length, "I did not intend to speak flippantly about the invitation to Guernsey's; I had not the

remotest idea that you had been subjected to such gross persecution. I do not know whether I have a right to suggest that your father——"

"You have no right!" flashed out Rose, flushing up; "criticism of me or of my father is not your privilege!"

She had not intended to speak that way, but it was done, and the words were beyond recall. Sark bowed; the colour stung his neck and ears; he turned away across the Barrens, head a trifle higher than usual. And Rose watched him out of sight with the tears trembling on her quivering lashes.

When he had disappeared, she flung the plantain leaves on the grass, stood up, and walked silently and swiftly across the moorland to her own house.

Her father was on the porch, vacant eyes dreaming, a soiled newspaper on his knees.

"Come into the house," she said firmly, "I wish to say something to you." And he,

with the instinct of all weak men whose first impulse is to obey a command, rose and followed her into the sitting-room.

"Father," she said breathlessly; "I cannot endure this much longer. If you do not leave Mr. Sark alone I will end everything in a way you won't like. No—I am not going to betray your White Riders or denounce them, because that would mean prison for you. Whatever you have been toward me I can't help feeling something for you that I suppose is love—or might have been. Anyway it is there—and I would very gladly give my own life to save yours—whatever the reason is that prompts me to feel so."

"What the hell are you talking about!" snarled Ember, roused out of his lethargy.

"I'm talking about Mr. Sark. I warn you to leave him in peace."

"You do, eh?" cried Ember; "and what will happen if I don't?"

"I'll marry him," replied the girl coolly.

Then Ember fell into one of his impotent

rages that left him white and exhausted at the end; and Rose hid her pale face in her hands until it was over and her father had begun his feverish attack on a bottle of raw brandy.

"I can't help it," said Rose; "I will marry him if I have to ask him to take me. I see no other way; I have offered you my money when I am of age; I have refused Murden; I have warned you to turn those miserable creatures Guernsey and Creed out of the house before I left it and you forever. Now you are trying to drive a man out of the country who has never in all his life addressed one word of love to me,—who cares nothing for my money,—nor for me, perhaps. And you and your company of highwaymen burn his barn, steal his cattle, insult him with threats—and how do I know that one of you—perhaps Murden—may not kill him?"

But Ember was too far spent with his rage and fury to reply; and presently she turned

and left the room where the creature she called father panted and mouthed and trembled over his bottle of raw spirits. For the man was going downhill at a fearful rate; a single month had wrecked this ruined being so utterly that even Murden considered him scarcely good for another month, and laid the lash on the more heavily to extract all that was left of his remaining strength.

CHAPTER XI

OLD COMRADES

IN WHICH MR. BATTY IS UNEXPECTEDLY DELIGHTED AND JOHN SARK MAKES A COMFORTING DISCOVERY.

When Sark left Rose Ember alone on the hill with her little trowel, her plantains, and her eyes full of tears, he walked away in that unpleasant frame of mind peculiar to the misunderstood.

It was quite true that he had no business to interfere in Miss Ember's affairs; still less graceful was his blunder in the implied criticism on her father—a remark that she had very properly cut short with a snub.

The coarse attentions of Guernsey and Creed had angered him,—not because he feared for his own suit,—but the defenceless situation of a girl with a weak-minded, sordid

rascal for a father made the importunities of the two grasping vulgarians distressing if not intolerable to him.

Gradually, however, as he walked, the chagrin from the snub administered by Rose lost its sting and became merged in a deeper feeling which he could no longer doubt possessed him.

"Nevertheless," he thought, "I can't make love to her yet; all these creatures have been haunting her ever since she became an heiress, and I can't speak now; it isn't decent."

He walked on, switching the bushes with the bamboo staff of his butterfly net. He would not believe it of her, but suppose Rose, who was young and impressionable, should mistake his motives. Suppose evil tongues should wag and hint that John Sark had never cared for her through the years when she was dependent on him for her daily bread, but that he had waked up quickly enough to the beauty of

a young girl with half a million in her own name.

"Idiots," he thought wrathfully; "as though I'd condescend to marry for all the money in New York State!"

He had come to the high-road by this time. The prospect was not very inviting for him to continue an aimless walk on that scorching dusty thoroughfare; and, as he did not know exactly what to do with himself, he sat down on the bank above the road and lighted a pipe.

The wind played pranks with the dust in the road below; tiny whirlwinds, pigmy siroccos, sand-storms in miniature raged with a fury which perhaps terrified the caravan of small red ants that had been voyaging all day long across the highway for some purpose only known to themselves and Sir John Lubbock.

Sark watched them streaming across the stony bank, penetrating the sparse grass-belt, then descending to the dry ditch that

bordered the bank, to emerge again into the dusty desert of the road.

He had been sitting there for ten minutes, perhaps, when the sound of wheels aroused him.

A conveyance from Heavy Falls was approaching,—a species of tramp stage which went anywhere for anybody, on payment of fare, creaking about from village to village, dried mud on shaft and axle, truly a shabby, uncertain, and unlovely craft for the highways of the Empire State.

There was a single passenger in it, a very bright-eyed young lady in mourning. The mourning was trim and approached dangerously close to coquettishness,—so close that Sark looked at her again, which is a way men have, even the least susceptible, and, alas, even those who are most in love with another woman.

"I reckon," said the driver, pulling up opposite Sark, "that you air Mister John Sark. Be ye?"

"I fancy I am," returned Sark, rising and lifting his cap to the bright-eyed young lady in mourning.

"I beg your pardon," she said anxiously, "but I am on my way from Heavy Falls to the water-tower station to catch the express train for New York. Now my driver tells me that his horse can't make the journey in less than two days—and I'm sure I don't know what to do—because he tells me there are no hotels here."

"It's thirty mile to the water-tower," said the driver doggedly; "I didn't cal'late fur to drive no furder 'n Amber Lake."

"But why did you not tell me that there was no hotel here?" she said indignantly.

"It ain't my business to supply superfloos infurmation to city ladies," said the driver placidly, but not with intentional disrespect.

Then Sark did the only thing that he could do under the circumstances; he invited the lady to rest at his house until

he could get his man to harness a team and take her to the water-tower.

She demurred of course,—but with a smile, and in due time she graciously inclined her ear.

Sark entered the staggering vehicle, bidding the driver direct his horses toward the house on the hill; and, in a few moments the tramp stage deposited them on the porch, to the agitation of Mr. Batty, who was looking out of an upper window.

"Why, that's Mr. Batty!" cried the newcomer looking up at the savant.

Mr. Batty disappeared and the next moment came prancing down the stairs and out on the porch.

Their greeting was unaffected, cordial, and amusing; he called her Mrs. Warne, then stared at her mourning while she bent her head and murmured that her widowhood was already the affliction of several years.

Meanwhile the driver of the tramp stage

had plumped Mrs. Warne's luggage down on the piazza and had remounted his vehicle. He would have driven away without taking further notice of anybody, had not his dull yokel's eye discovered Molly Trigg, in cap and apron, standing demurely in the doorway. And what a foolish grin he grinned while Sark whispered a few instructions to the abstracted maid, and signalled Mr. Batty to present him in decent form to the lovely Mrs. Warne!

"I was Mrs. Warne's professor at the institute," said Mr. Batty; "it is most delightful—most unexpected and entirely delightful, Sark,—in point of fact you can form no adequate notion of how delightful it is."

Mrs. Warne coloured prettily and dropped him a courtesy.

"Yes, I can," said Sark laughing; "and I am going to entreat Mrs. Warne to remain here to-night, not only because it would be an honour if she would accept our hospitality,

but also because my man has taken the team to the water-tower and could not possibly return until after midnight."

There was no earthly use in demurring this time; Mrs. Warne saw that at once. She couldn't get out of Amber Lake that day, and she accepted the inevitable so charmingly that Sark decided not to let her go on the morrow either, if he could possibly avoid it.

Molly presently reappeared to conduct Mrs. Warne to a guest chamber and place herself at her service. She took leave for the moment of Sark and Mr. Batty without embarrassment, and entered the house, discreetly conducted by Molly.

"I fancy," said Sark, "that you can manage to amuse Mrs. Warne this afternoon, can't you, Batty?"

"Are you starting out collecting?" asked Mr. Batty in confusion; "you know how ladies agitate me, Sark;—must you go?"

"Yes,—I might as well," said Sark. "I'm rigged for it, you see."

Mr. Batty beamed on him.

"Positively," he said, "I was never so surprised and delighted in all my life, Sark, never in my entire existence."

"I do not doubt it," said Sark gravely; "my compliments, if you please, to Mrs. Warne, and I place the house, grounds, and you at her absolute and unqualified disposal. I'll be back to dinner, of course."

"Ah," observed Mr. Batty with a retrospective smile which showed he was not listening. So Sark lighted his pipe again and turned on his heel.

Swinging on down the road, net over his broad shoulders, he soon overtook the tramp stage descending the hill by the Spook Bridge.

"Are you going back to Heavy Falls?" asked Sark, as he came up alongside of the dilapidated conveyance and seized the flap.

"I reckon," replied the driver looking at his horses' ears.

"I think I'll get in and drive with you," said Sark, suiting the action to the word.

"It's a dollar," observed the yokel, unmoved.

"A dollar to Heavy Falls?"

"Yep."

"But I'm not going as far as that."

"Oh, be you goin' to Weazeltown?"

A sudden idea struck Sark and he nodded:

"Yes, I'll drive to Weazeltown with you and walk back."

"Three shillin's," replied the youth, flicking a horsefly from the limp traces.

After Sark had paid his fare, the yokel relaxed, and ultimately became expansive and confidential.

"That's a slick gal of yourn, I guess," he observed; "hain't she jest elegant, now, in that pink dress an' white apron an' cap! oh my!"

"Who? Molly? You'd better wake up from that pipe-dream," said Sark sharply.

"Is that her name?" asked the youth.

He subsided into silence, but Sark saw his beardless mouth working out the word, "Molly," as though the bucolic smack of the name tasted good to love's untutored lips.

The stage had now entered that sand belt which lies along the edge of the pines to the north of the lake's outlet.

The sun's fierce rays set the horses' flanks in a lather, and presently they dropped into a walk. Slowly the weather-beaten wheels turned, crunching through the sand; the battered chariot reeked with the heat; every leather flap and cushion exhaled a musty odour of horse-hair, flaking varnish, and the peculiar rank scent of ancient lap-robes; but the heavy perfume from the pines predominated.

Sark leaned back in his seat, smoking, abstracted eyes following the dark shadows of stage and horses gliding alongside across the sand, until they came to the highway again where the dust whitened the roadside

bushes, and swift-winged butterflies darted up under the horse's feet.

Twice he stopped the stage to descend and investigate the clouds of butterflies that had accepted an invitation to a permanent luncheon among the thistles in the gully. The great shiny milk-weed stalks hung heavy with pink clusters too sweet for anything but butterflies and bees, and these he also inspected, securing three or four specimens of the prolific and endless Argynnis tribe. But he found nothing new among them.

The yokel, who drove, stopped obediently whenever Sark requested; he observed Sark's pursuit and capture of butterflies with a tolerant stoicism, characteristic of the natives of the North Atlantic States, who spend their entire lives attempting to conceal their suspicions of the city-bred.

To the inmates of Mohawk county, Sark was a harmless monomaniac to be treated with a certain consideration. Once, in-

deed, the farmers had got it into their heads that Sark was a new sort of philanthropist, dedicating his life to relieving vegetables and fruit trees of gipsy-moth, canker, chinch-bug, potato-beetle, and army-worm. Joyfully the population of the entire county had hastened to solicit his services for their individual cabbages and potatoes; but when he presented to each applicant nothing but a government pamphlet concerning insects injurious to vegetation, they retired, puzzled, disgusted, suspicious, and uncertain. Some believed that he collected butterflies as bait for fishing, some argued that he sold them "daown tu York" for weird and occult purposes, and probably at an immense profit; many asserted that he ate his specimens, others that "city women" wore them in their bonnets. However, all Mohawk county agreed on one thing, which was that Sark appeared to be utterly irresponsible to God, man, and the constitution of the United States.

While the dusty horses were drinking at a wooden trough brimming with sweet spring-water, Sark added a dozen or so exquisite violet-coloured butterflies to his list of captures, among them four splendid and perfect specimens of that rare boreal butterfly, Lycæna Couperi, an insect he had never believed could be found south of Newfoundland.

The capture of these specimens stirred the latent enthusiasm in him; he paid the yokel for his drive, gave him a cigar, and bade him depart in peace.

"But ain't you a-goin' to Weazeltown?" demand the driver.

"No, I'm going to hunt around the woods here for things."

"Critters?"

"Yes—all sorts."

"I guess," observed the yokel, "that Cy Pettengill, up to Weazeltown, can tell you a darned sight more about critters than you ever ketched in your fish-net. He seen

some with wings, all kind 'er striped yaller an' speckled——"

"When?" demanded Sark, interested.

"When he had the snakes!" roared the yokel, bursting into guffaws of laughter at his own exquisite humour: "so long, mister,—and, say—drink Mohawk Moonshine if yew want ter git the latest p'ints on things that flop an' hop!"

With this sarcastic but not unfriendly sally, the yokel sponged off his horses, climbed to the seat, bawled "wo—*hush!* wo —wo *hush!*" and the tottering stage swayed into motion. Long after the creaking of shaft and axle had died away, Sark could hear the distant bursts of loutish mirth, tuneless and vacant, until the incessant cawing of a crow overhead drowned it in his ears.

The road where he stood was flanked on either hand by woods. In the heated stillness the metallic notes of wakeful crickets pulsated through the grasses; long drawn

monotones of cicadas intensified the silence and the heat; a soft rushing sound, now waning, now growing fresher and nearer, came to him at moments; perhaps the still breeze in the trees, perhaps the distant noise of water flowing over gravel.

There is a breathless sense of expectancy in the air when the dim woods scarcely stir, when the sun spots sleep on the dappled beech, and a single leaf, where motionless a million hang, quivers alone, responsive to an unfelt wind.

Then there are degrees of silence, the strange sensation of slumbering green things, the unheard flow of the sap, mounting ceaselessly; the still creeping of tiny efts, the noiseless unfolding of blossoms, the soundless fall of the wind-flower's petals, settling on golden moss.

This is the silence of the woods in June, —this composite quiet, troubled with perfume stealing from every pore of earth. They that transpose it into the harmony of

waking life make no discords; the chirr of the squirrel, the dry croak of a preening crow, the velvet patter of rabbits, the whirr of the humming bird, the thunderous double beating of the partridge, all are but concords in the degrees of woodland quiet,—a quiet that is an endless changing symphony of heard and unheard sound.

And into this paradise of silence passed John Sark. The leaves of a vanished summer murmured as his firm heel pressed them, the moss slowly effaced the imprint of his foot, the crimson flower of yesterday lay down in its ring of fallen petals as his knees waded through the mint-scented thickets of bergamot.

He was approaching the further edge of the woods now.

Already he could see the scarred slopes of the Sagamore Hills, scarcely a mile away, and, nearer, the weather-stained hamlet that fringed the village of Weazeltown.

A field of clover lay between him and

the nearest cabin; he skirted it with due regard for the owner's prejudices, climbed a barbed-wire fence very gingerly, and was rewarded by finding a cattle-path which led him to the back door of the cabin he intended to visit.

There was nobody in the house except a sunburnt, sullen-faced young man who regarded him without favour as he entered the single carpetless room.

"Good-day," said Sark, pleasantly, "are you James McMurray?"

"Yes," said the young fellow, "but I won't talk, so you needn't waste your breath nor my time."

Sark, not in the least abashed, sat down on a shaky chair, uninvited, and began to prepare his pipe for smoking.

The young man, McMurray, eyed him sulkily until the pipe was lighted, then he started to leave the shanty but Sark called him back sharply.

"I tell you I won't talk," said McMurray;

"I guess I've had enough trouble without huntin' more. The sheriff he came to pump me, Squire Stringer he comes every day, and I guess I won't blab to a damn detective if I shut up to the sheriff."

"Oh," said Sark good-humouredly, "you take me for a detective? Why, McMurray, I thought you would remember me."

"Remember you?" The young man glanced at him derisively, then shrugged his shoulders and added: "I don't know you and I wouldn't talk if I did."

"Oh, yes, you would," said Sark, "if you were ever trumpeter in N troop——"

The man whirled about in a flash and stared at Sark.

"—In N troop, 7th Cavalry, Captain Ross,—first lieutenant Sark——"

Then a strange thing happened; McMurray dropped on to a stool beside the pine table and hid his head in his arms. The man was weeping; Sark quietly slipped out of the house and began to pace the arid

garden, hands clasped behind his back, head bent. He knew his man.

After a while McMurray appeared at the back door, an old slouch hat pulled low over his reddened eyes, a clay pipe between his teeth. Without a word or gesture Sark turned and retraced his path toward the woods, steering clear of the clover, recrossing the barbed wire, and finally entering the woods again exactly where he had left the shadow of the trees.

There was a clump of hemlock near by whose boughs swept the brown earth. Between these Sark ducked and threaded his way, followed by McMurray, until the two men stood face to face under a cool, thick tent of green.

"Now my man," said Sark, cheerfully, "speak out as though the band was playing Garryowen!"

Instinctively McMurray's hand sought his hat brim; he straightened up, pipe deferentially lowered, tear-marred eyes fixed on Sark.

"I didn't know you, lootenant,—I wouldn't have spoken back at you—but I've had hard luck, and the White-caps left me for dead, and now I've lost the quarry job."

He cleared his throat and struck the palm of one hand with a sunburnt fist:

"I didn't suspicion that this Mr. Sark they were harryin' over to Amber Lake might be you, sir; but the name was respected in the regiment and it sorter riled me when I heard the White Riders was burning barns that belonged to one of your name. That's what made me speak out the way I did at the quarry. Yes, sir, I told anybody who cared to listen that I had no use for White-caps."

He paused, looked at his pipe, and finally added: "I guess I was a fool."

"Did they hurt you badly?" asked Sark.

"Not very; the doctor at the quarry he fixed me, sir, after I come to."

Sark seated himself, but McMurray did not follow his example until invited.

"When did you leave the regiment?" asked Sark.

"Last November, sir."

"And you were doing well at the quarry?"

"Not very well, sir. I wish I was back at the old stand; I'm that lonesome sometimes."

"Is that your shanty?"

"Yes, sir."

"Anything in it?"

"No, sir, except what you seen."

"No money or papers or valuables?"

"Oh, no, sir," replied McMurray simply. "I ain't got none except this here honourable discharge in my vest pocket."

"Very well," said Sark; "I want you to come with me and run my stables for a while. I've a year yet at Amber Lake, and perhaps after that you and I may find ourselves back in the old regiment. What do you say?"

"I say thank you, sir," replied McMurray quietly, "and it will be a honour and a pleasure for me to be at your orders again, sir."

"And it will be a pleasure for me too," said Sarkheartily; "besides, you can use a rifle better than my friend Mr. Batty, and I fancy there may be a little shooting around the house before these White Riders have had enough."

"Did you see by the papers I was hurt, sir?" asked McMurray, setting his white teeth.

"Yes, but—I didn't think it was our old trumpter in N. I never imagined whom I was destined to find in that shanty. The truth is I intended to question you concerning your experience, and then draw my own conclusions about this White Rider business. I'm glad I came, McMurray," he ended emphatically.

"So am I, sir," said the trumpeter, "for it's God's truth you've saved me from murder, for I meant to kill one of them white-sheeted devils before I quitted Weazeltown!"

With a gesture of rage he tore his flimsy,

sweat-soaked shirt open to the waist. His body was all scarred and discoloured by the rawhides.

Sark red to the temples examined the marks.

"The disgrace!" muttered McMurray through his set teeth "that's what's killin' me, sir."

With a sudden movement Sark straightened up and held out his hand:

"Your officer could never take the hand of a disgraced man," he said pleasantly; "there,—the grip is comforting to me too. Button your shirt, man; I want no better comrade at my side than Jim McMurray—in the army or out of it!"

He turned and started homeward, through the darkening woodland, passing with light free steps across the fragrant moss. And after him strode James McMurray, late trumpeter in N troop, worshipping the very ground where Sark had passed.

CHAPTER XII

AFTERGLOW

CONCERNING THE DEMORALIZATION OF A SAVANT AND HIS REHABILITATION THROUGH HEAVEN AND A MOSQUITO.

In the meanwhile Mr. Batty had retired to his chaste chamber in the fixed and unshakable purpose of adorning himself with raiment of fine linen. A white duck suit, fragrant and fresh, was at his disposal; he emerged from the bath and regarded it with fond and astigmatic eyes.

The question of neckwear bothered him; in deference to Mrs. Warne he rejected tie after tie of many colours, until a silken scarf of pale heliotrope fascinated him. This delicate recognition of Mrs. Warne's afflic-

tion filled him with innocent pride in his own discernment; he crowned his shining head with a frisky little straw hat, readjusted his round spectacles, and fairly skipped down-stairs to the porch where Mrs. Warne was slowly pacing, gowned in some thin black stuff that gave her lovely arms and neck their proper value.

She was certainly expecting him, for she pretended that wide-eyed, unlimited surprise peculiar to the inexperienced. It settled Mr. Batty.

"Sark's gone off after butterflies," he said, "and I am delighted—that is to say I am going to take you for a row on the lake,—if you don't mind——"

"It is so warm in the sun," she pleaded, looking straight into his eyes.

"Yes, but you have a sunshade in your hand——"

"The wind might tip us over—I should never dare to go."

"Positively I assure you, Mrs. Warne——"

"I never could venture out on that very large deep lake."

"But if I fancied for one moment you would be in danger——"

"No, no, I am such a coward about boats. But if it is going to disappoint you, Mr. Batty——"

So they went down to the lake together and Mr. Batty found a dry boat, unclogged with weed, and he seated Mrs. Warne in the stern.

The water was dancing with white sun-spots, the blue sky was cloudless, the speckled trout shot up above the surface, black against the glare, and fell back without a sound. In the sedge the snipe were calling to each other in long sweet double crescendo; the great pad-frogs floated, half immersed, along the shore like green goblins, watching them with changeless eyes; a filthy little heron, gorged with fish, flapped up from the reeds and wheeled away heavily in slow measured flight across the water.

The outlet to Amber Lake is a dark and narrow stream, flowing silently under thickly leaved branches which interlace high overhead. Here the great belted kingfisher amuses its big-mouthed young with endless performances on the rattle; here the lady mink teaches her little ones to slide into the water without splashing, and to play tag with the startled trout; here the gorgeous wood-duck builds in the hollow tree, and takes her young to the water as Jupiter bore Ganymede.

"It seems very lonely and dark in here," said Mrs. Warne, looking into the forest from the boat with concealed satisfaction.

"But romantic," said Mr. Batty, beaming amiably into her questioning eyes.

"I am much too old for romance," said Mrs. Warne; "you never intended a flirtation here?"

Struck speechless by her audacity, Mr. Batty rested on his oars, eyes riveted on hers. Too late he saw how he had been

misled by the false ear-marks of innocence, too late he perceived that she was afraid of nothing on earth, including an upset in the lake and a guileless savant, prematurely bald.

"Do you want to row out into the lake again?" he asked feebly; "it's not dark out there."

She rested her pretty chin on her wrist and looked at the water. Presently she spoke of old times, of the great school, of the girls she had known there. The wind itself was no softer than her voice, the blue iris that budded shoreward was no sweeter than her eyes.

"Talk to me," she said; "you don't know how pleasant it is for me to think of the dear, dear past, and to see a phantom of days long vanished."

The phantom said he liked it too, in a voice that sounded firmer and more confident. He even giggled when Mrs. Warne recalled their former relations as tutor and

pupil, sobering, however, when she asked him if he blushed as easily now as he did in those days. Of course he gave her a proof of his abilities in that line, and caught a crab in his confusion which tossed his hat among the rushes on the starboard bow.

"It's my fault," said Mrs. Warne, reproaching herself aloud,—"wait, I can reach it—if you hold tight to my hand——"

And the demoralisation of Mr. Batty proceeded.

About three o'clock another boat appeared, apparently seeking the sequestered nook where Mr. Batty and Mrs. Warne were now anchored.

"It's Lanark and Miss Guernsey, confound it!" said Mr. Batty in tones which brought a shade more colour into Mrs. Warne's cheeks.

"And pray, Mr. Batty, may they not pass by us without annoying you?" she asked.

"Certainly, certainly," replied Mr. Batty in pink confusion, "I only thought——"

But what his thoughts might have been remains a mystery to this day, even to himself. The chances are Mrs. Warne could have interpreted them better than anybody else.

"The boat has turned around; they are going away again," she said mischievously; "I am so sorry we have taken their pretty shady anchorage, for—I think—they look like lovers."

"They are," said Mr. Batty bitterly, recollecting the first night he had ever seen Alida Guernsey.

Of course that would not do; Mrs. Warne's plump white wrist was immediately bitten by a midge, and it fell to Mr. Batty to apply a cooling layer of wet sand to it. And the demoralisation of that good man proceeded.

Toward sunset,—but while the sun still hung in splendour above the empurpled Barrens, flooding moor and bog and wood and furrowed swale with molten gold, the plover

began calling from the distant marshes and the great pad-frogs strummed and drummed, and the little tree-toad's treble swelled from the thickets, answering the cry of a solitary night-hawk, winging, pitching, and soaring high in the rosy zenith. Then the sustained, high-keyed note of some hidden insects broke out from the bank above, the cricket's theme throbbed from every tuft and stone and tussock, the blue-black swallows, with saffron breasts tinged by the last level sunbeams, sat twittering in rows on some bare branch, or dropped into the dusty high-road to rest a second and then soar upward through the drifting clouds of midges.

There is a dangerous sweetness in the fresh June days, leading maid and man to frivolous thoughts, but the sweetness of the eventide is more dangerous still, for frivolity grows sober with sunset, and light words and light thoughts seem to conceal a deeper meaning.

Mr. Batty, bathing his head in the sera-

phic afterglow, recognised with a helpless thrill that the witchery of the even was upon his soul. Words uttered under such influences lose their airier and evanescent quality; glances count heavily; the touch of finger-tips is a serious pledge; a sigh a solemn confession. It is a dangerous period of the day—this rosy apotheosis of the dawn. Dusk is far less dangerous; moonlight is merely *risqué*; starlight a provocation and excuse for insincerity incarnate. But this still fragrant atmosphere of rose was not created for diaphanous coquetry, and triflers had better hold their peace or speak of weighty things, weighing their words.

"You are so silent," said Mrs. Warne; and Venus herself must have wept at the unprotected innocence so utterly at the pretty widow's mercy.

A glance, a word, and Mr. Batty knew he should begin to say things that he wouldn't say at any other period of the twenty-four hours. Heaven interposes yet,

at intervals, and still uses its humblest servants as instruments to work its will. And on this occasion Heaven directed a mosquito to the creamy cheek of Mrs. Warne, where it settled with satisfaction and bit long and deeply.

"Oh, dear!" said Mrs. Warne in real vexation; "I am perfectly certain my face will bear that mark for days and days!"

The sun had set; the spell was broken; Mr. Batty drew from his coat pocket a small vial and presented it to Mrs. Warne. And while that pretty woman rubbed a few drops of the contents upon the indiscreet mosquito's burning souvenir, Mr. Batty, knowing his danger was over, chose a subject of conversation and slowly developed it:

"There are," said he, "various methods in vogue for successfully combating the poisonous effects of insect stings. After years of consideration and modest research I find the following method effective in many cases. Rub the affected region with a few

drops of the following antiseptic formula: Colourless extract of Skunk Cabbage, Colourless extract of Calendula; Thymolate of Soda; Sulpho-carbolate of Zinc; Boracic, acid Extract of Witch-hazel; Menthol; Oil of Wintergreen; Oil of Spearmint; and finally Oil of Eucalyptus. I believe that this mixture represents the latest advancement in chemical science and pharmaceutical skill, toward a non-toxic antiseptic, for wounds, bites of insects or animals, cuts, bruises, burns, urticaria, colds, tonsilitis, bronchitis, pharyingitis, hoarseness, mouth and tooth wash, ivy-poisoning, and as a deodoriser, also for sponging after shaving or bathing, cholera infantum, summer complaint, typhoid fever, and digestive disorders."

"Mercy!" said Mrs. Warne in a faint voice.

But he fixed her with his astigmatic eyes, and he held her and dealt her justice:

"Internally, in cases of great exhaustion following the shock of being bitten by any-

thing between a gnat and a horse, I suggest a little prescription of my own discovery, called 'Fyxem.' Fyxem represents the active principles of life; chemically an Iodophosphorised Proteid. It is made from the brain-substance, including the Pituitary Body, Thyroid and Thymus Glands, Salivary and Intestinal Glands, and the Pancreas. In its extraction, dear Mrs. Warne, I preserve the true nuclein-substance, never remaining intact by any ordinary chemical methods of enucleation, which by breaking up its molecular arrangement, disturbs its physiological activity."

"Would you mind rowing back now?" said Mrs. Warne coldly. And Mr. Batty cheerfully bent to the oar and pulled for the shore, discoursing pleasantly all the time on the Iodophosphorised Proteid.

"If ever," thought Mrs. Warne to herself, "I go out again with that man!"

But she did.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CAMBRIC MASK

IN WHICH THE READER, BEING QUITE AS DISCERNING AS THE AUTHOR, AND VASTLY MORE INTELLIGENT, WILL EXPERIENCE NO SURPRISE AT THE CONCLUSION

WHEN Sark and ex-trumpeter McMurray reached the house, the sun had almost disappeared behind the edge of the Barrens, and the tree-toads quavered and trilled from every clump of woodland.

"It will rain before morning," said Sark, "and I must close the scuttles on the hothouses. Come in, lad, you are in permanent quarters now—for life if it suits you. I've no end of good underwear and clothes for you."

Molly Trig appeared in dainty cap and

apron, standing at attention with now and then a stolen oblique glance at the ragged trumpeter.

"Molly," said Sark, "this is trumpeter McMurray of my old command, who is going to take care of my stables and greenhouses. He will have the west room connecting with the gun-room. Take him there and see that he has everything he wants."

He stood a moment, watching Molly trip away, followed by the sturdy-limbed trumpeter, then he left the hall by the eastern porch and started toward the greenhouses.

He could see Rose Ember moving about in the third greenhouse, and, after closing all the sky-lights in the other two, he entered the heavy-scented glass enclosure where the young girl was adjusting the gauze nettings for the night.

She looked around over her shoulder as his footsteps crunched on the gravel, and he bade her good-evening in a low voice,

saying that the tree-toads were sounding their weather warnings and that hatches must be lowered.

"What success did you have?" she asked timidly.

He handed her his collecting box, telling her about the boreal species he had found near the watering trough on the Weazeltown road.

"Weazeltown! Did you go there?" she exclaimed.

"Almost," he replied. "I went to find out about some matters that interested me, and I ran across the trumpeter of my old regiment living there. He's a good fellow; I have brought him back with me, and he's going to take full charge of stables and greenhouses." He added, smiling:—"So you need not be obliged to dig up plantains any more."

"But I like to!" she insisted in hurt astonishment.

"All right," he laughed, "you shall dig

up as many as you please. But there is something else I wanted to speak about. On our walk back from the outskirts of Weazeltown one or two things happened, and I'm going to tell you about them because you ought to know."

She watched his face in silent attention as he stood fumbling in his pocket for something which proved to be a folded bit of paper.

He opened it and glanced at the contents. Her eyes were riveted on his.

"Did you ever hear of a man in Weazeltown named Nubar?" he asked.

"No," she said simply.

"Are you sure? Try to remember. They call him Gyp Nubar——"

"Oh," she said quickly, "you mean the Gipsy!—I believe he is called Gipsy Nubar. But he doesn't live anywhere permanently; he is a real gipsy, I believe."

"When did you see him last?" asked Sark.

"Why, I can't remember. I believe he

came to the house to sell baskets a few weeks ago——"

"Exactly; and he tells fortunes?"

"Oh, yes; he told mine once."

"Really," said Sark, much interested; "do you remember what method he employed? Was it cards, or palmistry, or——"

"No, no," she said; "he had a big sheet of paper covered with all sorts of designs—flowers, birds, animals——"

"Insects?"

"Yes—there were insects too. He had them numbered, and he pretended to make calculations."

"Was this the paper?" asked Sark, handing her the sheet he had been examining.

"Yes, it is the same, I think," replied Rose, surprised.

"Oh—thank you," said Sark cheerfully; —"and please don't speak of this to anybody just yet."

Rose smiled faintly, and stepped out into

the evening glow. Sark closed and locked the door, and rejoined her on her way to the house.

"And is the finding of that paper your only adventure on the Weazeltown road?" she asked, as he stepped up beside her.

"No," he said; "I met the gipsy himself, or rather I overtook him on the road, half an hour later. He was bound for Guernsey's, where that Venetian fête is going to take place on the lake to-night."

"But didn't you give him his paper?" asked Rose, surprised.

"No; I showed it to him, and he claimed it, swearing that he himself had drawn the designs on it. I pretended to doubt his statement, and challenged him to draw something in my note-book. He became very angry, saying that he was the descendant of ancestors who had drawn designs from the dawn of creation,—that the obelisks and tombs of Egypt were his witnesses, that the totems and bark-letters of

the American Indians were his modern corroborations.

"Then I asked him if he himself were not partly Indian, and he said it was true, but that the Indians and Egyptians were originally one people."

They had reached the house by this time and they mounted the steps of the porch together. He drew a big willow chair to the piazza rail. When she had seated herself, he found a place on the railing beside her.

After a short silence she asked him why he had not returned the paper to the gipsy.

"It's rather a curious story," replied Sark; "you see I refused to believe his claims to it until he satisfied me by drawing something in my note-book. He grew angrier and angrier, but at length he took my pencil and drew a beautiful outline of a dragon-fly,—the kind we find everywhere on the Barrens,—Anax Junius, you know. Then, just as he finished, the wind fluttered

the pages of my note-book, and, as he searched for the drawing among them, he came upon my name written on the fly-page. The next moment he had turned and bounded straight into the willow thicket; McMurray, my trumpeter, and I were after him in a second, but upon my soul! Miss Ember, an Apache in the hills is easier to catch than that gipsy!"

"But what in the world," cried Rose, "made him afraid of you?"

"Ah," replied Sark quietly, "that is a matter for speculation."

"And you are speculating?"

"I *have* speculated."

"Successfully?"

"I think so."

"You are very provoking," said Rose, "but I am not a bit curious to know. And," she continued scornfully, "is that the sum total of your adventures this afternoon?"

"Not quite all; I was shot at twice from ambush," he replied coolly.

She was on her feet in an instant, one arm laid on his; but he only said: "I was not hit,—neither was McMurray—I only told you because I think this house is no longer safe for you after dark."

Her hand fell from his sleeve; he turned and looked out across the darkening lake where a single boat was slowly drawing shoreward.

"That must be Batty and Mrs. Warne," he observed; "we'll have a very jolly dinner to-night, with you and Lanark and Batty and Mrs. Warne——"

"Who is Mrs. Warne?" asked Rose in a curiously choked voice.

Sark told her about his encounter with the pretty widow, and seemed to find the episode most amusing to relate, but Rose did not even smile, and, when he had finished, she offered no comment, but sat silent and absorbed in the great willow chair, her sweet face indistinguishable in the falling night.

The new moon lifted its silvered sickle over the trees beyond Guernsey's. Rose saw it over her right shoulder and made a fervent wish which sent the hot blood surging to her face.

Sark saw it and smiled grimly to himself, for the curved crescent hung like the blade of Damocles over the house of Guernsey, and he fancied that both Guernsey and Creed would very soon become aware of facts calculated to deprive those thrifty financiers of their peace of mind.

The blue dusk fell like velvet across the lawn; the tiny lamps of the fire-flies broke out along the shadowy hedge; the night-hawks flashed in and out of the rays from the lighted lantern at the gate-drive, and the lake-breeze stirred the pale roses on the trellis.

And all the while questions were quivering on Rose Ember's lips,—questions she would never ask,—"Who is this woman Mrs. Warne? What is she to you? Why

should you find her pretty—and why do you tell me?" But her lips uttered no sound.

Lanark sauntered in with his rod and creel to present some new and ingenious excuse for having caught nothing; Mrs. Warne and Mr. Batty came strolling up the road from the boat-house below the Spook Bridge with their arms full of wild iris blossoms.

Rose met Mrs. Warne with a composure which changed to cool reserve when that pretty woman, ignoring Mr. Batty, permitted Sark to find a great bowl for the iris buds. After a while Rose slipped away from the shadowy group on the piazza and went to her own room—for she had a fresh cool boudoir in the house, although she seldom used it.

In the hallway she came upon Molly Trig, hands clasped behind her trim back, listening, open-lipped, to a tall, sunburnt young fellow who was saying:

"—And it would just raise the curls under

your cap to hear them redskins a-squealin' their heads off, and the carbines bangin', and——"

"Molly," said Rose, "I am going to my room to dress. Please come and help me."

Ex-trumpeter McMurray stepped back against the wall, hand raised at salute; Molly, flushed and disconcerted, trotted away after Rose; but her thoughts were with the trumpeter whose tales of the howling West had done a certain work of their own in her credulous and palpitating bosom.

Dinner was announced at eight; Sark, descending the broad hall stairs, gave his arm to Mrs. Warne, and Mr. Batty and Lanark followed with Rose.

At the iris-crowned table Mr. Batty said grace with his usual apparent suspicion of the impending repast, and the oysters were promptly accounted for by five very hungry young people.

For the first time in his life Sark saw Rose in a dinner gown that left neck and

arms bare. Her flushed youthful beauty, her pretty dignity, the velvet of her voice stirred him profoundly. He could not keep his eyes from her; he tried to devote himself to his guests, but, had Molly been less expert, trouble would certainly have fallen upon that repast.

Mrs. Warne's undisguised admiration for Rose Ember did a great deal toward that subtle harmony so necessary to make such little dinners delightful. Besides, her experience taught her that Sark was in love with his beautiful vis-à-vis, and that tact was more necessary than salt at that banquet.

"Ah," sighed Mr. Batty, when coffee had been served, "if we might with propriety only crown each other's brows with scented iris!"

"Why not!" said Rose, laughing; "I am sure I would crown anybody with pleasure; would not you, Mrs. Warne?"

Lanark pulled a handful of flowers from the centre-piece and gravely started to con-

struct a chaplet for Mrs. Warne, while Rose deftly twisted the long iris stems into a wreath and calmly crowned herself with a saucy smile at Sark.

Mr. Batty wore his wreath rakishly, and, when he raised his glass and drenched the centre-piece with a libation of champagne to the gods, Sark jogged his elbow as a caution.

"I don't care," murmured Mr. Batty, "I've eaten and drunk things that would excite the bones in a catacomb. Let me alone, Sark, I'm going to make music!"

He pounced playfully upon the piano, and struck into the Bacchanalian march from "Philemon and Baucis," a proceeding that annoyed Sark intensely.

"Suppose we dance!" exclaimed Rose, leaning across and bending her flushed face toward Sark.

"You and I?" he asked.

"Everybody—of course; but I'll begin with you—if you wish it very, very much."

Under her scented iris chaplet her blue

eyes sparkled, and the scarlet burned in her parted lips.

Lanark called to Mr. Batty: "Oh, play a waltz, won't you?" and Mrs. Warne repeated the request as Rose Ember stood up with an invitation for Sark in her eyes.

But Mr. Batty was deaf to entreaties; he broke into song, and an innocuous rendering of a pirate ballad brought the others around him in protest.

"Just one more," he pleaded, and piped up:

"My old man he can't go to sea,
He ain't no sailor an' he never will be,
He'll just stay at home with the kids an' me,
For to light the fire in the morning!"

But the company could stand no more, and he was coerced into a dismal waltz which he said was Spanish but which Rose asserted was a requiem. However, they were in the mood for dancing to any tune, and Sark slipped his arm around Rose Ember's pliant waist. The room was littered in a few minutes with iris flowers, and overturned chairs

and, after a while, they found it pleasanter to dance in the hall and out across the verandah.

"I'm tired of playing that old thing," said Mr. Batty plaintively; so Lanark took his place and started a two-step that sent the chairs flying in every direction.

"You do dance well," said Rose, sinking into a chair on the verandah as Lanark ended the music with a reckless bang!—"I never imagined you would condescend to frivolity."

"They taught us that sort of frivolity at West Point," replied Sark, "but I never cared for dancing before I held you in my arms."

She looked out across the lake where the fire-flies sparkled above the water and the quiet stars inlaid the placid surface with fretted silver.

Lanark passed them in the dark, a light coat over his evening dress.

"When is that Venetian fête coming off?" asked Sark.

"About eleven, I believe," replied Lanark.

"Surely, Mr. Lanark, you are not going after trout to-night," said Rose mischievously.

"If," replied Lanark with a malicious glance at Sark, "I could find sport nearer home, I'd be very grateful, Miss Ember." And he went away toward the boat-house, humming a lively air.

"What do you suppose he means by that?" asked Sark, vaguely irritated. But Rose said she didn't know.

A few moments later Mr. Batty and Mrs. Warne began to sing duets at the piano inside, and the burden of every song was love.

"Oh, let's walk," said Sark impatiently, "do you mind, Miss Ember?"

"I must go home," said Rose.

"So soon?"

"Yes—so soon."

After a few moments she rose silently, bidding him wait, and in a little while returned, dressed in her morning gown, tying

the limp strings of her sunbonnet under her rounded chin.

"So much for vanity and the world," she said softly.

They passed soberly, side by side, across the lawn. As they came to the crest of the hill, Rose, glancing over her shoulder, saw the rockets begin to rise across the lake from Guernsey's, and she stopped.

"See the blue and silver stars," said Sark as the dull boom of a bomb followed by the sharper report in mid-air came on the night wind across the water.

"I was thinking," she said, "that if Mr. Lanark is really in love with Alida Guernsey, she is going to have a great deal to be thankful for."

"Why?" asked Sark; then he added: "Of course Lanark is a splendid fellow——"

"I mean something else," said Rose; "I mean that she will escape young Samuel Creed. Is Mr. Lanark going to run away with her?"

"He'll have to do something of the sort," said Sark, "for they mean to marry her to young Samuel, I understand."

"Then why should he wait!" cried Rose in sudden anger: "Why does he not take her away now!—to-night! If I were a man and I loved a girl——"

"What would you do?" asked Sark after a moment of silence.

"I would not let her suffer," said Rose; "Oh, if men knew what women endured——"

Again he waited for her to finish, but she said nothing more, and, finally, they started on again across the Barrens.

Poor little Rose! So all her resolution had vanished,—all her courage had exhaled with the dying daylight!—And she had threatened to ask Sark to marry her—she had warned her father that she should offer herself to him unless the White Riders left him in peace.

And now, this very day, somebody had

shot at him from ambush,—worse still, a White Rider raid had been planned for that very night, and she knew it, and her father had cursed her and defied her to warn Sark.

Could she warn him without betraying her miserable father? All day long she had been trying to think of some way, and, at last, desperate, she had decided to tell him that she loved him, and beg him to carry her that very night to Heavy Falls. She had dressed for the part; a dozen times she felt that she had only to utter a single word; but she could not.

They were close to Ember's house now; the owls were hooting in the hemlocks, and a curlew answered from the marsh.

"Not that way," she whispered, drawing him around to the side of the house, where the unpainted exterior stairway rose to her bedroom.

The shadow of a great tree bathed the corner of the house in darkness, and Sark

moved cautiously, holding his arms before his face.

She thanked him for coming, and whispered her good-night, giving him a cold hand that trembled in his own.

"Good-night," he whispered in return, and released her hand.

She mounted two steps of the wooden stair; he stood just below, bareheaded. Then, in a moment, she bent over the flimsy rail, and held out her hand again with a little sob.

He had already taken her white fingers in his,—he had set his foot to the stairs, when a low clear whistle sounded close to them, and Rose sprang to the ground beside him.

"It's the White Riders' call," she whispered feverishly; "they are abroad to-night, Don't stay here,—don't speak to me—go back through the Bàrrens and watch your house!"

He looked at her in silence: she faced him breathlessly.

Again the sweet bird call floated across the moorland, farther away now.

"Go!" she motioned with her lips; and, as he did not stir, she laid one hand on his arm,—a soft little hand that crept upward to his shoulder, touched his neck, and clung there, as she raised her burning face to his. The next moment she was in his arms and their lips met.

"I love you," she gasped—"if you will take me, take me quickly."

The bird call broke out with startling distinctness so close at hand that Sark recoiled.

"Go," she murmured,—"I will come to you to-morrow for always!—always!—oh, if you do really love me go, now! And watch to-night!"

He turned and kissed her, then passed swiftly under the shadowy trees and, entering the Barrens, was blotted out in the darkness. The next moment Ember appeared, leading a saddled horse around the corner of the house.

"Is that you, Rose?" he said sharply. "Well, what the devil are you doing here? Hey? Been to Sark's of course! Well, you can quit that damned crank for good to-night!"

She came up to where he had halted with the horse, and laid her hand on the animal's glossy neck.

"Are you going with the White Riders to-night?" she asked steadily.

"Well, what if I am?" he replied with a sneer.

"Because," she said, "Mr. Sark has heard that the Riders mean to do him mischief to-night, and he will shoot to kill."

"He won't monopolise the shooting," replied Ember brutally; "get out of the way there!"—and he led his horse to the rear door and began to cover the beast from head to hock with white drapery. The horse appeared simply ghastly, looking out from the round eyeholes in the head-covering, and Ember tied the floating sheets

firmly under the animal's neck and sat down to sort out his own mask and hooded robe of white.

In the dark sitting-room Rose stood alone, listening to the gathering of the clan; rider after rider rode up, horses disguised in white, cavaliers hideously shrouded in robes with pointed hoods, in which two round holes revealed living eyes that sparkled in the starlight.

The incessant bird calls heralded the arrival of the ghostly horsemen; not a word was spoken as they dismounted and stood bridle in hand at the rendezvous, an eerie company in truth, ranged there in the waning starlight.

Then an unexpected thing happened: there came the heavy double gallop of more horsemen, a shrill whistle, a cry, a rush of many feet, and Rose, springing to the porch, saw three riders gallop up leading a horse on which a man in disordered evening dress sat, bareheaded, coatless, with his arms

bound behind him and a rope around his neck. And the man was John Sark.

She did not cry out or swoon; she saw them cluster around him, peering up at him through their slitted masks; she heard Murden's voice whispering just outside the window:

"I got him at the Spook Bridge; he showed fight but we slung him on to Nolan's horse. Now, damn him, he'll pay me for my trouble!"

"You ain't going to lynch him," came Ember's voice in a hoarse whisper.

"Lynch him! I'll do something worse than stringing him up and riddling him! I guess I've been laying for him long enough —outside his hedge there while he was dancing with Rose on the verandah."

"It's murder," stammered Ember.

"Is it," replied Murden coolly; "where is Rose?"

The next moment he came heavily into the house, swinging his white robe over his

shoulder, but Rose had slipped up to her own room like a flash.

"She's in her den," said Ember, following him into the house; "I'll get her locked in safe." But when Harvey Ember had climbed the inside stairway to Rose's room, he found the chamber untenanted.

"Look here!" whispered Murden fiercely, "if that girl of yours has gone off with the alarm, I'll see you get a bullet in your whisky-soaked hide!"

"She hasn't!" said Ember, cursing, "she don't dare squeal on me."

"Come on then," said Murden; "we have no time to waste here anyway." And he descended the stairs heavily.

Outside Sark still sat his horse, surveying the goblin crew with cool, alert eyes. At a signal the band mounted, but there seemed to be some confusion, for one rider's horse was missing. However there was no time to lose waiting for one man, and the long clear whistle, thrice repeated, set the

horsemen off at a gallop, straight out into the Barrens.

A big white-clad cavalier led them, flourishing a rawhide, and the others followed, crowding closely around Sark, who sat his horse like the trooper he was in spite of his bound hands and the noose that cut his neck.

They had been riding for five minutes through the darkness when the first flurry of rain struck them full in the face. In a moment sheets and hoods and masks were soaked and clinging ; the horses' disguises, wringing wet and stretched out of shape, began to impede the animals' movements ; one or two stumbled, and for a moment confusion reigned in the little squadron.

It was during that brief moment that Sark felt a sharp sting across his knuckles. Somebody had deliberately drawn a knife-blade over his helpless bound hands, and the stealthy cruelty of the act roused every fighting spark in him. He looked around

desperately, teeth set, feeling the warm blood running into his clenched palms. Suddenly the cold knife-blade stole over his hands again ; there came a quick release of pressure around his wrists, and his swollen hands tingled with returning circulation.

Somebody had cut his bonds.

He seized the severed rope in his fingers, still keeping his clasped hands behind him, although the effort was purest torture. But he knew he had a friend among the hideous horsemen,—which one he could not tell,—and he meant to do what he could to deserve the good offices of the secret ally.

And now the leader halted at the edge of a swamp pond, flat, glossy black, over which the mist curled like smoke; and the horses trampled up on every side, splashing through the bog that shook and quaked beneath their tread.

" Are you going to throw me into the black quicksands? " asked Sark of a rider who was releasing his torn neck from the noose.

There was no answer; the rain poured down steadily on the marsh; the horses stamped and snorted at the black danger lying beneath their very feet.

Then the man with the rawhide walked his horse slowly up to Sark, and bade the prisoner dismount; and, the next moment, Sark had sprung clean out of his saddle and was at the White Rider's throat. In an instant the whole band of horsemen were in wildest confusion; the horses backed and reared through the driving rain, a shot was fired, another and another, and somebody shrieked: "My God! I'm in the quicksands!"

Before the wretched man could cry again another rider was floundering and screaming in the unseen death; a terrible panic followed, and the horsemen, cursing and shouting, wheeled back into the Barrens and stampeded in every direction.

Sark had torn the mask from Murden's face and hurled the heavy, infuriated rider

at another horseman, who collapsed and went down with a crash into the mud. Now he was in the saddle alone, with both arms free, and the fighting blood raging through his veins. He put his horse at a White Rider who was shooting at him, and bore horse and man to the ground. Two others, struggling in the swamp, dragged their horses out of the ooze and started across the Barrens in frantic flight; and after them galloped Sark, *ventre-à-terre*, with murder in his eye, and, in his bleeding fist, a rawhide. He could scarcely see the two dim forms ahead of him for the driving rain and the darkness, but he shook out his bridle and swung his terrible rawhide, and galloped at the phantom shapes that fled before him. Suddenly he came on one of them and cut him from his saddle, fairly lifting him into the air with the frightful blow, but the rawhide was torn from his hand, and he galloped on after the other fleeing ghost that had already disappeared in the blackness ahead.

Already the lights of his own house twinkled through the sheeted rain on the left; he caught a glimpse of the flying rider passing in silhouette before his own windows, and with a fierce laugh he fairly flung his horse across the valley, wheeled to the left, and cut the intervening angle with a single bound. The next moment he seized the hideous shrouded form of his antagonist, and tore him from the saddle. The masked rider twisted and fought and writhed, but Sark slipped to the soaked turf, dragging his victim with him. Then began a wrestling match in the darkness, that ended almost as quickly as it had begun, when Sark flung the rider on his back and stripped the mask from his face,—tore the white mask from a face, ashy pale, in which, for a second, two great blue eyes flashed at him under a mass of heavy tangled hair, then closed slowly.

Rose Ember had fainted in his arms.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MASTERS OF FINANCE

A CHAPTER CONTAINING MATTERS OF MORE OR LESS IMPORTANCE TO EVERYBODY CONCERNED.

THE disintegration of the lawless band known as the White Riders is part of the history of Mohawk County; their secrets, signals, ritual and codes are now known. And with their final disappearance, the other secret brotherhoods of the county dissolved into legendry as quietly as they had come into existence.

However, on that clear, sparkling, dewy morning in June, John Sark, mounted, carrying a shot-gun with butt resting on his thigh, rode out into the Barrens after the biggest game that walks on two legs. On

his left hand rode ex-trumpeter McMurray, armed with a Winchester; and, a hundred yards to the right, Reginald Lanark cantered through the scrub, a heavy ten-bore duck-gun resting in the hollow of his arm. The rear of this invading horde was skilfully covered by Mr. Batty on a sturdy plough-horse, a Colt's self-cocking revolver in either hand and two more in his belt.

The *reconnaissance* presently stretched out in a single line, moving slowly west by south, riding through every tuft of rushes, beating alder coverts, scouring scrub and tussock and the long swales where purple bunch-grass signalled safe conduct for the traveller of the Barrens.

Over the spongy moss, green and gold, over the wastes of reindeer moss that showered the air with silver flakes, over acres of huckleberry and wild strawberry and blackberry interlacing shrub and vine in blossoming network, they cantered, weapons poised, keen eyes always searching.

Their awkward, distorted shadows fled away over the moorland in front, leading them an eerie chase toward the looming purple gloom of the horizon; their skirmish line routed the white-tailed rabbit from its form and scattered the grey snipe into whirling flocks, that drove skyward like snow-squalls in a whirlwind. The tall blue heron stood in his pre-empted pool to watch them pass, then resumed a heavenward contemplation; the hell-diver dived and looked and dived again, only to peer through the miniature waves after these intruders in the desolate land; and, far across the moorland tangle, where the ash trees mingled with poplar and white birch, the young deer huddled and crowded together, big ears and slender muzzles pointed toward the distant line of horsemen, until the buck whistled, and the herd turned with a bound and a flash of the white flags of a hopeless truce, eternally broken, but never by the deer.

When at length the hunters of big game

came to the edge of the black sands,—that dreadful polished stretch of ooze threaded by tiny streams flowing swiftly over silvery streaks of bottomless quicksand, Sark dismounted and reconnoitred his way to the edge of the silent morass.

There were signs enough of what had passed the night before,—here a revolver lay in an iridescent pool of water, there a tattered, rain-soaked sheet was caught on a bush. But nothing human, or what had once been human remained, save the imprint of hoofs that had hatched the muddy brink into a slough.

Lanark shrugged his shoulders and threw his gun over his shoulder; McMurray made a bundle of what relics they found, while Sark, on foot, started on a cautious demi-tour of the swamp. He had gone perhaps a quarter of a mile when something just beyond the swamp grass moved,—something white—and in a second he had it covered with his shot-gun. After a few moments

he lowered his gun, and slowly picked his path toward the white object that still fluttered and waved in the summer wind; and, when he came nearer, he saw it was a bit of white cotton cloth from which a human hand protruded, clenching a bunch of grass.

He had a rope twisted around his waist; noosing it, he tried again and again to lasso the ghastly thing in the mud. At last he succeeded; the noose settled fairly and tightened, and he drew the bundle of mud and flesh and rags partly in among the rushes,—near enough to see the half-buried face. It was Murden.

But there was more to do before he called the others from their picket duty in the scrub; something else that he had overlooked was sticking up out of the wire-grass just beyond Murden; and again, crushing back his horror, he cast his noose and drew his burden shoreward. There were two of them this time; and he knew them both.

After a while, however, he could stand no

more for still other signs signalled the hiding place of death among the reeds, and the hot close air made him faint.

He passed his hand across his eyes, gasped for air, raised his gun and fired. Then, as the answering report came leaping out of the thickets to the east, the whole bank on which he stood quaked, trembled, and slowly slid toward the quicksands.

With blanched cheeks and shaking limbs, Sark staggered and fell, clutching the wire-grass. It broke; he seized it again; again it gave way, but this time he had his fingers entwined in the roots of a dead shrub which barely held imbedded until he rolled over on his face upon the solid moss.

Lanark galloped up as he rose and reeled back from the swamp's edge where now nothing remained of his gruesome flotsam,—not even his own rope and shot-gun.

He laid his head against Lanark's knee, holding to the saddle with both hands.

"They were there," he said weakly,—"Murden, Ember and Dagberg. The bank slid,—I had a close call myself——"

Lanark surveyed the surface of the swamp.

"You'll never see them again, Jack," he said; "come on; climb up behind me."

With its double burden the horse trotted back to the eastern end of the morass, where Sark mounted his own horse, still trembling with the horror of the hidden death that lay under the ooze and slime of the wind-stirred rushes.

He signalled McMurray to his side, then wheeled and set off at a steady gallop for Amber Lake, followed by Lanark and Mr. Batty.

"Come abreast," he said to McMurray, half turning his head; and, when the ex-trumpeter had forced his mount up close, Sark ordered him to remain mute regarding the discovery of the bodies.

McMurray touched his hat in silence.

"Did you go the rounds from the distillery at sunrise?" asked Sark.

"Yes, sir; Murden, as you know now, hadn't come back to his store; Dagberg's shanty was empty, but his horse stood at the door in a terrible state; Con Nolan lay in bed with his ribs broken; and Spike Mitchel had been seen in a buck-board, drivin' like a crazy man for the railroad. As for Harve Ember, of course his house was empty."

"Of course," replied Sark mechanically, thinking of other matters that bid fair to wreck what years of life might remain to him.

"Pardon, sir," observed McMurray, "but I have the gipsy safe in the cellar."

"What!" exclaimed Sark in astonishment; "where did you catch him?"

"I ketched him last night, sir, after you left the house to walk with Miss Ember. I was thinkin' of what you said—how as that Gyp Nubar would take your note-book to Creed and Guernsey; so I just got a boat

and rowed over to the fireworks, and the first thing I clapped eyes on was this here Nubar comin' out of Guernsey's house."

"But how in the world did you get him into my cellar?" asked Sark.

"Oh, I hit him on the head with a oar and slung him into the skiff. He waked up before I could get across the lake, but he didn't show fight and went to the cellar very meek. Molly, she is doin' sentry at the cellar door, sir."

"Didn't Guernsey or Creed or any of those people interfere with you?" demanded Sark.

"Oh, no, sir; Creed, he began to shout—but I had my oar handy, and I backed down to the landing with the gipsy under my arm like a dead coyote."

"I fancy Creed and Guernsey will be over to see me this morning," said Sark with a menacing laugh, as he galloped his horse up to the porch of his own house.

Lanark and Mr. Batty arrived a moment

later and dismounted, the latter with moans.

"It's not a horse," he said to Sark; "it's part camel, part buck-saw;' I'll ride a kangaroo next time;—here, take your pistols!"

McMurray led the horses around to the stable while Lanark, with his arms full of weapons, climbed the stairs to the gun-room, and Mr. Batty crept into the parlour where for a quarter of an hour he practised sitting down.

In the dining-room Sark found Mrs. Warne, preparing a bowl of beef-tea; she looked up anxiously as he entered, but he only paused long enough to ask how Miss Ember was feeling, and then disappeared into the kitchen where Molly and fat Sarah paraded up and down before the bolted cellar panels.

"Give me a lamp," he said, unlocking the door; "now, Molly, go and help Mrs. Warne care for Miss Ember. And if Mr.

Creed and Mr. Guernsey call, seat them on the verandah."

His interview with the gipsy in the cellar lasted long enough to make fat Sarah nervous, and she armed herself with an axe and a frying-pan and poked her turbaned head down the cellar.

"Foh de lan's sake, Mars' Sark, yoh, sutt'nly done scare me! Is yoh jes' berryin' de co'ps, suh?—or might you be desirin' moh pistols, suh?"

At that moment Sark emerged, conducting the gipsy to the outer air, and fat Sarah scowled a terrible scowl as they passed, which scared the wretched gipsy so badly that Sark was obliged to support him to the side door.

"It's a close call for you, Gyp," he said; "but I believe you have told the truth."

The gipsy crept out into the fresh sunlight and waited for his dismissal, cringing like a wild creature in a pit.

"It's just that," said Sark, "which makes me release you. I never could bear the

sight of a wild thing in a cage,—I'm too fond of freedom myself. You would die in prison,—and after all you are not particularly guilty of anything except trying to get your fortune-card back. However, there are less rascally methods in vogue for recovering personal property, and I should advise you to follow them or take to the woods for good. You are free."

"And my card," whispered the gipsy.

Sark handed the curiously designed sheet of paper to him.

"Tell your fortunes, sell your baskets, but steer clear of the White Riders," said Sark, affably.

"I'll tell yours now," replied the gipsy so quickly that Sark almost started.

The gipsy smiled, stooped, picked a dandelion which had gone to seed, and blew the silky down from the stem at one breath.

"Your troubles, sir," he said quietly,—"are scattering like this ghost-flower?"

"Thank you," replied Sark grimly.

The gipsy's eyes sparkled; he raised one dusky hand:

"They who gallop in robe and mask,
Ask of the devil an easier task;
Never again the moon shall see
Sign of the chief or company.

Yet there are riders who ride with death
To succour the soul and the body's breath
Of hunter and hunted, for death and life;
And a burial shroud may hide a wife!

Read your riddle ere day is done;
One can answer, and *only* one!
This of a rider in white you'll ask
And find the key in the Cambric Mask!"

"What do you know of the cambric mask?" said Sark harshly.

"Cross my palm, Romi," whined the gipsy, creeping up closer; "cross it with silver in the name of her you love."

"In the name of your impudence, my friend," said Sark, steadying his voice. He dropped a coin into the dark hand adding: "How was it that you did not know me there on the road until you saw my name in the note-book?"

"I did know you, Romi," replied the gipsy. He lied. But he only followed his profession.

When he had gone, Sark re-entered the house with clouded face and troubled eyes. He found Mr. Batty seated in the parlour in bitter dejection.

"First I couldn't sit down," he said; "now I can't stand up. In heaven's name, Sark, draw that sofa over here and let me roll off on it!"

Lanark passed the door, pausing to whisper to Sark, then hastened away toward the boat-house below the Spook Bridge.

"Come, come, Batty," said Sark impatiently; "go up and change your clothes; Mrs. Warne will nurse you and administer arnica or something."

"I can't!" moaned Mr. Batty; "I'd do it if I could."

But Sark pulled him to his feet and started him up the stairs, which he found

more agonising to mount than even the plough-horse.

"It's an injury," he protested, "that is hopelessly sui generis! Nobody can pity me, nobody can soothe me, no tender woman can apply cooling salves in my case! There's no romance in it, Sark, and Mrs. Warne can mind her own affairs!"

Molly came down-stairs saying that Miss Ember was awake and feeling much better, and would Mr. Sark please see her as soon as she was dressed.

"Yes," said Sark; "say that I will come in half an hour. And, by the way, Molly, I have suggested to ex-trumpeter McMurray that you and he confine your chaste salutations to the kitchen."

Molly mounted the stairs, scarlet face in her apron, and Sark, biting an unlighted cigar, walked out to the piazza whence he could already see Joshua Creed and Daniel Guernsey hurrying across the lawn.

The morning had grown hotter; the sun

blazed in a cloudless sky, sending even the chickens under the lilac bushes and the pigeons to the shadow of the eaves ; but those two good men, Joshua Creed and Daniel Guernsey, hastened on, regardless of the sun's searching rays, perspiring, dusty, unshaven and wild-eyed.

Creed outran Guernsey and dashed onto the veranda where Sark now sat placidly smoking.

"It's a swindle!" shouted Creed, swinging his lank arms like two flails,—"its a darned swindle an' conspiracy, an' I'll hev the law on ye!"

Guernsey waddled up, coughing and panting and groaning, and fell into a basket-chair, making awful faces at Sark.

"What is the matter?" said Sark unmoved.

Creed broke into passionate accusations, and Guernsey squealed from his basket-chair, and Sark smoked impassively until the tumult subsided from sheer want of breath.

"I'm ruined," gasped Creed,—"you hev

been an' ruined me, John Sark, an' I'll let the court decide about them false pretenses."

"Rubbish!" said Sark calmly; "don't attempt to read the law to me. And," he continued, "the less you have to say the better, Mr. Creed. You and your partner there in that chair wilfully and deliberately attempted to swindle me out of land which you believed to be valuable, land that you thought I held worthless because I had not heard of this railroad improvement. That is what they call in finance a masterly stroke of business, I suppose. I did not care to sell the land for reasons that I gave at the time. You insisted, and finally offered so much that I consented to sell it for Miss Ember's sake. She has her money; you will have your land in a year. What more do you wish?"

"But you own the railroad that they was a-buildin' here! You air the owner of the Ulster an' Chenango!" howled Guernsey, rolling around in his chair. "An' now you've gone an' stopped the work, an'

this here land ain't worth a sack o' shucks!"

"Why didn't you find that out before?" said Sark quietly.

"Didn't we go for to find out everything!" wailed Guernsey. "Didn't Joshua Creed go to New York City for to ask gratooitous infurmation? An' didn't they tell him that the U. & C. company owned the road, and that Lanark was attorney?"

"They told the truth," replied Sark; "Lanark is the attorney, and I am the Company. I was only a stockholder when you bought my land; but I bought the U. & C. branch road from the company within twenty-four hours of the time that you purchased my land."

Joshua Creed's seamed face turned the colour of green clay. He dug his bony fingers into his palms and glared vacantly at Sark.

"Why should I build this road to improve your land, bought from me for half its

value?" said Sark. "You would have bought it for a dollar if you could. You talk to me of fraud? I am carrying out a bargain forced upon me by you, in hopes of defrauding me of the value of this property. I could forgive you that, but I never will forgive your persecution of Miss Ember, nor your insults to her under plea of a courtship as wicked and disgusting as anything I ever heard of in all my life!"

Guernsey collapsed with a hopeless squeal; Creed turned a haggard face on Sark.

"I guess judgment is heavier agin me than you know," he said; "I am visited by the Lord in my only son Samuel, which he has run off to York with the corps de bally girls an' telegraphs me fur my blessin'."

The horrible pallor on the old man's face, the nervous contortions of his bloodless lips, his grey, unkempt hair, his gnarled fingers picking at each other, had their effect on Sark. He swung around toward Guernsey,

who lay inert and stupefied in the basket-chair.

"I am no financier," he said; "your buying and selling and lying and perjury disgust me. God knows how men can pass a lifetime at it, but there are strange things in life and a man must live to learn about them."

He stood up, tossing his cigar over the rail.

"I am going to buy your land back from you, and I am going to pay you exactly what you paid for it," he said slowly; "not from philanthropic motives, for if two rascals ever deserved retribution, I fancy you fill all requirements, but because I will not have the stain of jobbery or sharp dealing on me or mine?"

Guernsey, eyes popping from his apoplectic head, had struggled into a sitting posture, but Sark turned on him sternly and bade him hold his peace.

"There is one condition in this," he said;

" Mr. Lanark is going to marry your niece, Miss Alida Guernsey, and if you make a single objection—if you utter one howl—if you so much as open your mouth, I'll drop the whole affair and Lanark will marry your niece into the bargain! Good afternoon, gentlemen. You will receive a certified check on Monday next, and Mr. Lanark will attend to the whole affair."

He walked slowly back into the house, wondering whether he had been too lenient with the financiers of Amber Lake. Then he shook his broad shoulders with a sigh of relief; he was done with trading and buying and dickering for ever, and he thanked Heaven for that, and went up-stairs.

Molly was standing by Rose Ember's chamber door when he entered the upper hallway.

" May I come in, Miss Ember?" he asked.

" Come," she replied from within.

He had intended to make her tell her own story, to justify herself, to explain how she

came to be riding among the ghastly horsemen who were conducting him to his death. He knew perfectly well that her purpose had been to aid him ; he knew now who it was that had cut the rope on his wrists. But he wished her to make it clear why she had never before warned him of what she must have known ; he wished to know why she had shielded her father.

Suddenly, as his hand fell on the door, the face of Harvey Ember as he had last seen it, came before his eyes—ghastly, pallid, marred with mud. And yet, in death, a strange change had come into the drunkard's weak features,—the shadow of that fine nobility which marked his daughter's high-bred face.

" He may have been that kind of man," thought Sark ; " why should she not have loved him once? Then, after all, she was his own daughter——"

He opened the door and entered.

CHAPTER XV

THE MISTRESS OF ROMANCE

CONTAINING A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE AILMENT OF THE WORLD FOR THE READER TO DIAGNOSE AS THE READER CHOOSES

TOWARD the end of August, when the young woodcocks' wings are stronger and their sleek breasts grow saffron like the breasts of summer robins, the trout leave the bottom sands where they have been cooling their golden bellies through the hot July solstice, and move in solid schools toward the lake's limpid inlet. Then the bull-trout's spots become glowing coals of fire, and the gravel beds begin to swarm with slender darting shadows, and the kingfishers splash in the spawning beds, and the young grouse

dust themselves in the blackberries. Then, too, the slow soaring hawks drift through the blue, turning, wheeling, sheering over the woodlands, now misty with their bloom of August haze ; and the crows despatch their ambassadors to the four quarters of the wind, summoning their kindred to the yearly plebiscite.

On the Barrens the great blue heron's note fell echoing like the sharp thwack of an axe ; the raccoon's weird whistle sounded from the cornfield, the velvet hung raw and red where the young bucks crossed antlers, and the jays screamed all day in the yellowing woods.

A sharper, fresher scent filled the night when the wind rose on the moors; the sweet-fern grew golden and dry, the tall brake curled up at the tips, green mooseberries turned scarlet, and the perfumed bloom of crimson bergamot carpeted the brook's moist banks with petals, brilliant as dying cinders.

But the death of the year was yet far away, —that sombre leaden time, when the odour of the woods grows rank and penetrating, when musty puff-balls explode in a shower of snuff, when the smoke blows down under damp gables, and the fur on the domestic cat crackles, to that reserved animal's acute mortification.

The death of the year was far away–nay the ripening had not fairly begun, for the wind was not yet soaked with the fruity perfume from the orchards, and the red-stalked buckwheat still remained unstacked.

But the smack of the lake breeze was tinged with a winey flavour that must have tinctured the water too, for the trout had been jumping deliriously in the evenings, and the golden grasses thrilled all day, and the amber essence dripped from the fine-groomed spruces, where drunken butterflies crawled and spread their vermilion-banded wings, drinking deep in tipsy company with vicious ants and grey-striped flies.

From that day in August when she had sent for Sark to come to her chamber, Rose Ember had not left her room. Not that she was unable ; she was strong and physically healthy. But she had learned from his eyes her father's fate—she had divined it in the sound of his step as he opened the door at her command,—and she would not allow him one word until she had dragged the entire story from him, sentence by sentence. Then she had sent him away.

The effect on her had been strange : she did not give way to grief, she sought neither consolation nor advice. But from that moment she sank into an apathy which was not an acceptance of sorrow nor a dull acquiescence in grief. There was nothing of inertia, either mental or physical in her attitude, neither did there appear to be any fixed purpose or definite resolve. She lived, day after day, in her room, occupied with whatever presented itself to her ; she ate, drank, slept : she sewed a great deal on a black

gown she was making, but she never spoke of Sark nor of her father.

The struggle in the dark, when she had wrestled on the soaked sod with Sark, had apparently left nothing but superficial injuries : there were black and blue marks on her limbs, but these gradually disappeared.

For a few days Sark respected her silence and seclusion, but, when at length he found that her attitude bid fair to endure indefinitely, he went to Lanark, deeply troubled.

"It's natural," said Lanark, "wait a bit."

Sark did wait; every night he went to Lanark with haggard eyes to seek some explanation for her attitude, but Lanark, at length could invent no more reasons, and advised him to send for a physician.

"Won't she allow you an interview for a single minute?" he asked, watching Sark's aimless steps.

"No; I have sent Molly to her for the last time with such a message: now I'm going

to have Batty see her and find out what on earth all this means."

"Batty?" repeated Lanark sarcastically.

"Why not?" replied Sark warmly; "he's as clever a doctor as I ever knew. He invented that mosquito ointment, didn't he?"

"It isn't a doctor you want," said Lanark. "Miss Ember has some idea in her head that you were responsible for her father's death. If I were you I'd knock on her door and demand an explanation in person."

"I can't do that," said Sark miserably; "it's my house, you know."

"Then I'll do it," growled Lanark,—"and I'll do it now! This thing might as well be settled to-day as next year."

He rose, in spite of Sark's protestations, put his pipe in his pocket, shook the ashes from sleeve and lapel, and marched upstairs.

Rose opened her door at his knock, but did not invite him to enter. She had been

packing her two trunks; the floor was littered with shoes and stockings and toilet articles.

"You—you are not going away?" stammered Lanark.

"Yes; I am going to-night. I would have gone a month ago but I had no black gown to wear. I have made one here."

Lanark, completely puzzled, stared at the pale-faced girl. For the first time there were traces of tears in her eyes.

"See here, Miss Ember," he blurted out, "do you fancy that Jack—that Mr. Sark—had anything to do with your father's death?"

She shrank back with horror stamped on every feature.

"God forbid!" she whispered; "I never dreamed of such a thing!"

"Then why on earth do you treat him like this?" cried Lanark in growing excitement; "for a month you have refused to see him; you have never mentioned him to

Molly; you have shut yourself up in this room denying everybody except the servant. There is some strange misunderstanding somewhere or other."

"There is no misunderstanding," she replied firmly; "and I am going to see Mr. Sark to-day because he has my money and I need some of it for my journey."

"Your money?" said Lanark; "do you mean the money for the land? Didn't you know he had used it to buy back the land?"

Rose swayed where she stood, then fairly fell into a chair. In a moment Lanark was beside her, but she straightened up, bidding him leave the room.

"No, I won't," he said; "what in the world is this dreadful trouble that has come between you and Jack? Don't you know he's head over heels in love with you?"

"It's a falsehood!" she cried out, revolted; "and it is time you should know it—you of all men!"

She sprang to her feet in burning anger,

grasping the back of the chair as though she would crush the wood to splinters.

"If you also have been deceived in him and the woman you love, learn the truth now!" she flashed out; "I, myself, lying here weak and ill in my bed, with my window open, heard him say to Daniel Guernsey: "I am going to marry your niece, Alida, and you dare not prevent it!"

Lanark turned scarlet but not with anger. Then he began to laugh until Rose, dazed, thought that the unexpected blow had certainly made him mad.

When Lanark recovered his breath, he began walking excitedly around the room ejaculating disconnected sentences:

"That's it! I knew there was something up! And Jack's a lucky man!—Give me a splendid healthy woman with youth and beauty, and sweetness and every grace under the sun, and she's imperfect—by heaven! she's imperfect unless the ensemble is seasoned with a good sound vigorous red-hot

pinch of jealousy! And Alida is not destitute of it either!"

"Certainly," murmured Rose to herself, "the blow has made him quite mad."

"Oh no, it hasn't," said Lanark, so suddenly that she stepped back hastily; "I know what you're thinking, Miss Ember, and I fancy you'll consider me a stark staring lunatic if I tell you that Jack never asked to marry anybody but you, and that I am going to marry Alida Guernsey one week from to-day."

"I heard him say he was going to marry her," said Rose faintly. She felt strangely weak and tired; a veil seemed to float before her eyes, and she covered them with both hands.

"You heard him say these words: I am going to marry Miss Guernsey myself—but it was to *me* he intended marrying her—and it was her uncle he would not permit to marry her to Samuel Creed! Oh, this English language is a monstrous thing!"

Rose was sobbing bitterly, head buried in her hands ; Lanark turned and left the room quietly, and hurried down the stairs, but Sark had gone.

"I think Mr. Sark is going out on the lake," said Molly ; "he took his rod, sir."

Lanark went back up the stairs, three at a time, and entered Rose Ember's room without ceremony.

"Miss Ember," he said solemnly, "Mr. Sark has gone down to the boat-house. What he means to do there I can only conjecture,—for there are, in life, miseries that even the strongest can no longer endure and they say that drowning is not at all unpleasant"——

But he finished his doleful peroration to an empty room, for Rose had sped away like Atalanta, and, like Atalanta's race, her race, too, was a race with death—so she believed,—or perhaps she did not really believe it.

However, it came to pass, that while John

Sark sat in his boat-house, sulkily anointing his hands and face with Mr. Batty's reeking mixture to discourage the caress of mosquitoes, the door opened abruptly and Rose Ember appeared, breathless, radiant, with brilliant lips parted in a soft cry:

"Jack I love you! Take me in your arms!"

"Oh, Heaven!" moaned Sark, standing up, hands and features dripping with Mr. Batty's mosquito ointment. "Was ever a man placed in such a maddening position!"

"I don't care about my gown," pleaded the girl, cheeks aflame, and hands outstretched. "Oh, I want to cry on your shoulder!"

They were blissfully happy in spite of the tar and oil, but Sark found time for a deep and comforting anathema directed against Mr. Batty and his elixir.

"There he goes now," whispered Rose, nestling closer to Sark's shoulder.

Out in the sunlit lake Mr. Batty floated

peacefully, and Mrs. Warne idly wiggled the rudder-strings as her sweet will dictated.

"Do you think she will get him?" asked Sark, after a silence.

"Do you think he will get her?" asked Rose in soft reproof.

"Perhaps they will get each other," said Sark, who was a just man, as men go; and Rose accepted the compromise, smiling, for she was very, very much in love.

At last Sark managed to remove the last traces of the elixir from Rose and himself, and she put both her arms around his neck and he held her superb young body close to his.

About sunset Rose asked timidly, "Dearest, did you see that Libellula Trimaculata about an hour ago?"

"Yes, sweetheart," he said gently, but recklessly, "and I also caught a glimpse of that rare northern Erebia Discordalis, but, and Heaven is my witness, I would not move from the tender sanctuary of your

embrace for any butterfly that ever waved antennæ!"

"Except another North American Venus —Actias Astarte," she murmured conscientiously.

"No—not for that! For I hold in my arms the lineal descendant of Ashtoreth, Astarte, and Venus Aphrodite—and there is nothing on earth, dear, but your eyes, and hair, and lips, and these white arms around my neck!"

That man had been an officer in the United States army, an athlete, a scholar, and an entomologist in full possession of his faculties!

"And our romance shall never end?" she whispered; "oh master of my fate?"

"Never, unless you will it, dear Mistress of Romance!"

ENVOI

Hark! The Horned-Lark calls again,
Where the dripping snow, slow flowing,
Melts in hollow, hill and plain—
Hark! The Horned-Lark calls again,
Lingering yet spurning Spring;
Labrador shall hear her sing—
Hark! The Horned-Lark calls again,
Drifting North on ashen wing.

Dear Heart, let the ice-bird go,
Let the white squall fling the snow;
What care we for Winter's sting! —
So within our hearts be Spring
Where heart's-ease is blossoming?

Let the skirling sleet-squall moan,
Let the sombre ice-bird sing
Where the green floes grind and groan,
Where the blue bergs, splintering,
Crash and freeze in clashing seas!
South the sap flows through green trees;
South the Blue-Birds beat the breeze.

South the Spring-tide choristers,
Gaily tinted foresters,
Fill the ringing woods with glee,
Caroling from hedge and tree
Showering earth with melody!

South the Scarlet Tanager
Burns athwart the woodland's gloom ;
Forest dusk was make for her,
As the chaliced orchard bloom
Blossoms for the Oriole—
As the silent frozen Pole,
Buried deep in snowy stole,
Marks the Horned-Lark's holy goal—

Hark ! The Horned-Lark calls again,
Where the dripping snow, slow flowing,
Melts in hollow, hill and plain—
Hark ! The Horned-Lark calls again,
Lingering yet spurning Spring !
Labrador shall hear her sing,
Drifting North on ashen wing—
Hark ! The Horned-Lark calls again !

R. W. C.

Mid-Winter, 1899.